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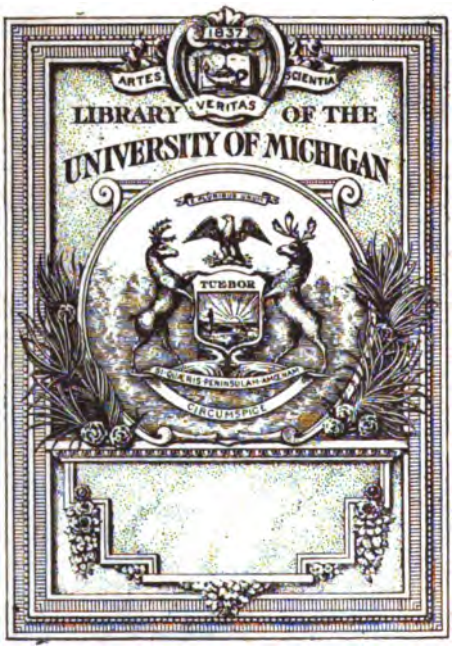
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RED POTTAGE.
DIANA TEMPEST.
SIR CHARLES DANVERS.
A DEVOTEE.
THE DANVERS' JEWELS.

MOTH AND RUST

FIRST EDITION . . . *November* 1902
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MOTH AND RUST

TOGETHER WITH GEOFFREY'S WIFE AND THE PITFALL

By MARY CHOLMONDELEY,
AUTHOR OF "RED POTTAGE."

"Rust in thy gold, a moth is in thine array."
—CHRISTINA ROSSETTI.

SECOND IMPRESSION

LONDON
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TO

ESSEX.

Not chance of birth or place has made us friends.

PREFACE

My best thanks are due to the Editor of *The Graphic* for his kind permission to republish "Geoffrey's Wife," which appeared originally in *The Graphic*.

MARY CHOLMONDELEY.

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MOTH AND RUST

MOTH AND RUST

CHAPTER I

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal."

THE Vicar gave out the text, and proceeded to expound it. The little congregation settled down peacefully to listen. Except four of their number, the "quality" in the carved Easthope pew, none of them had much treasure on earth. Their treasure for the greater part consisted of a pig, that was certainly being "laid up" to meet the rent at Christmas. But there would hardly be time for moth and rust to get into it before its secluded life should migrate into flitches and pork pies. Not that the poorest of Mr Long's parishioners had any fear of such an event, for they never associated his sermons with anything

to do with themselves, except on one occasion when the good man had preached earnestly against drunkenness, and a respectable widow had ceased to attend divine service in consequence, because, as she observed, she was not going to be spoken against like that by any one, be they who they may, after all the years she had been "on the teetotal."

Perhaps the two farmers who had driven over resplendent wives in dog-carts had treasure on earth. They certainly had money in the bank at Mudbury, for they were to be seen striding in in gaiters on market-day to draw it out. But then it was well known that thieves did not break through into banks and steal. Banks sometimes broke of themselves, but not often.

On the whole, the congregation was at its ease. It felt that the text was well chosen, and that it applied exclusively to the four occupants of "the Squire's" pew.

The hard-worked Vicar certainly had no treasure on earth, if you excepted his principal possessions, namely, his pale wife and

little flock of rosy children, and these, of course, were only encumbrances. Had they not proved to be so? For his cousin had promised him the family living, and would certainly have kept that promise when it became vacant, if the wife he had married in the interval had not held such strong views as to a celibate clergy.

The Vicar was a conscientious man, and the conscientious are seldom concise.

> "He held with all his tedious might,
> The mirror to the mind of God."

There was no doubt he was tedious, and it was to be hoped that the portion of the Divine mind not reflected in the clerical mirror would compensate somewhat for His more gloomy attributes as shown therein.

Mrs Trefusis, "Squire's" mother, an old woman with a thin, knotted face like worn-out elastic, sat erect throughout the service. She had the tight-lipped, bitter look of one who has coldly appropriated as her due all the good things of life, who has fiercely rebelled against every untoward event, and who now in old age offers a passive, im-

potent resistance to anything that suggests a change. She had had an easy, comfortable existence, but her life had gone hard with her, and her face showed it.

Near her were the two guests who were staying at Easthope. The villagers looked at the two girls with deep interest. They had made up their minds that "the old lady had got 'em in to see if Squire could fancy one of 'em."

Lady Anne Varney, who sat next to Mrs Trefusis, was a graceful, small-headed woman of seven-and-twenty, delicately featured, pale, exquisitely dressed, with the indefinable air of a finished woman of the world, and with the reserved, disciplined manner of a woman accustomed to conceal her feelings from a world in which she has lived too much, in which she has been knocked about too much, and which has not gone too well with her. If Anne attended to the sermon—and she appeared to do so—she was the only person in the Easthope pew who did.

No; the other girl, Janet Black, was

listening too now and then, catching disjointed sentences with no sense in them, as one hears a few shouted words in a high wind.

Ah me! Janet was beautiful. Even Mrs Trefusis was obliged to own it, though she did so grudgingly, and added bitterly that the girl had no breeding. It was true. Janet had none. But beauty rested upon her as it rests on a dove's neck, varying with every movement, every turn of the head. She was quite motionless now, her rather large, ill-gloved hands in her lap. Janet was a still woman. She had no nervous movements. She did not twine her muff-chain round her fingers as Anne did. Anne looked at her now and then, and wondered whether she—Anne—would have been more successful in life if she had entered the arena armed with such beauty as Janet's.

There was a portrait of Janet in the Academy several years later, which has made her beauty known to the world. We have all seen that celebrated picture of the calm Madonna face, with the mark

of suffering so plainly stamped upon the white brow and in the unfathomable eyes. But the young girl sitting in the East-hope pew hardly resembled, except in feature, the portrait that, later on, took the artistic world by storm. Janet was perhaps even more beautiful in this her first youth than her picture proved her afterwards to be; but the beauty was expressionless, opaque. The soul had not yet illumined the fair face. She looked what she was — a little dull, without a grain of imagination. Was it the dulness of want of ability, or only the dulness of an uneducated mind, of powers unused, still dormant?

Without her transcendent beauty she would have appeared uninteresting and commonplace.

"Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth."

The Vicar had a habit of repeating his text several times in the course of his sermon. Janet heard it the third time, and it forced the entrance of her mind.

Her treasure was certainly on earth. It consisted of the heavy, sleek-haired young man with the sunburnt complexion and the reddish moustache at the end of the pew—in short, "the Squire."

After a short and ardent courtship she had accepted him, and then she herself had been accepted, not without groans, by his family. The groans had not been audible, but she was vaguely aware that she was not received with enthusiasm by the family of her hero, her wonderful fairy prince who had ridden into her life on a golden chestnut. George Trefusis was heavily built, but in Janet's eyes he was slender. His taciturn dulness was in her eyes a most dignified and becoming reserve. His inveterate unsociability proved to her—not that it needed proving—his mental superiority. She could not be surprised at the coldness of her reception as his betrothed, for she acutely felt her own great unworthiness of being the consort of this resplendent personage, who could have married any one. Why had he honoured her among all women?

The answer was sufficiently obvious to every one except herself. The fairy prince had fallen heavily in love with her beauty; so heavily that, after a secret but stubborn resistance, he had been vanquished by it. Marry her he must and would, whatever his mother might say. And she had said a good deal. She had not kept silence.

And now Janet was staying for the first time at Easthope, which was one day to be her home—the old Tudor house standing among its terraced gardens, which had belonged to a Trefusis since a Trefusis built it in Henry the Seventh's time.

CHAPTER II

"On peut choisir ses amitiés, mais on subit l'amour."
—PRINCESS KARADJA.

AFTER luncheon George offered to take Janet round the gardens. Janet looked timidly at Mrs Trefusis. She did not know whether she ought to accept or not. There might be

etiquettes connected with afternoon walks of which she was not aware. For even since her arrival at Easthope yesterday it had been borne in upon her that there were many things of which she was not aware.

"Pray let my son show you the gardens," said Mrs Trefusis, with impatient formality. "The roses are in great beauty just now."

Janet went to put on her hat, and Mrs Trefusis lay down on the sofa in the drawing-room with a little groan. Anne sat down by her. The eyes of both women followed Janet's tall, magnificent figure as she joined George on the terrace.

"She dresses like a shop-girl," said Mrs Trefusis. "And what a hat! Exactly what one sees on the top of omnibuses."

Anne did not defend the hat. It was beyond defence. She supposed, with a tinge of compassion, what was indeed the case, that Janet had made a special pilgrimage to Mudbury to acquire it, in order the better to meet the eyes of her future mother-in-law.

All Anne said was, "Very respectable people go on the top of omnibuses nowadays."

"I am not saying anything against her respectability," said poor Mrs Trefusis. "Heaven knows if there had been anything against it I should have said so before now. It would have been my duty."

Anne smiled faintly. "A painful duty."

"I'm not so sure," said Mrs Trefusis grimly. She never posed before Anne, nor, for that matter, did any one else. "But from all I can make out this girl is a model of middle-class respectability. Yet she comes of a bad stock. One can't tell how she will turn out. What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh."

"There are worse things than middle-class respectability. George might have presented you with an actress with a past. Lord Lossiemouth married his daughter's maid last week."

"I don't know what I've done," said Mrs Trefusis, "that my only son should marry a pretty horse-breaker."

"I thought it was her brother who was a horse-breaker."

"So he is, and so is she. It was riding to hounds that my poor boy first met her."

"She rides magnificently. I saw her out cub-hunting last autumn, and asked who she was."

"Her brother is disreputable. He was mixed up with that case of drugging some horse or other. I forget about it, but I know it was disgraceful. He is quite an impossible person, but I suppose we shall have to know him now. The place will be overrun with her relations, whom I have avoided for years. Things like that always happen to me."

This was a favourite expression of Mrs Trefusis'. She invariably spoke as if a curse had hung over her since her birth.

"What does it matter who one knows?" said Anne.

Mrs Trefusis did not answer. The knots in her face moved a little. She knew what country life and country society were better than Anne. She had all her life lived in the

upper of the two sets which may be found in every country neighbourhood. She did what she considered to be her duty by the secondary set, but she belonged by birth and by inclination to the upper class. It was at first with bewildered surprise, and later on with cold anger, that she observed that her only son, bone of her bone, very son of herself and her kind dead husband, showed a natural tendency to gravitate towards the second-rate among their neighbours.

Why did he do it? Why did he bring strange, loud-voiced, vulgar men to Easthope, the kind of men whom Mr Trefusis would not have tolerated? She might have known that her husband would die of pneumonia just when her son needed him most. She had not expected it, but she ought to have expected it. Did not everything in her lot go crooked, while the lives of all those around her went straight? What was the matter with her son, that he was more at ease with these undesirable companions than with the sons of his father's old friends? Why would

he never accompany her on her annual pilgrimage to London?

George was one of those lethargic, vain men who say they hate London. Catch them going to London! Perhaps if efforts were made to catch them there, they might repair thither. But in London they are nobodies; consequently to London they do not go. And the same man who eschews London will generally be found to gravitate in the country to a society in which he is the chief personage. It had been so with George. Fred Black, the disreputable horse-breaker, and his companions, had sedulously paid court to him. George, who had a deep-rooted love of horse-flesh, was often at Fred's training stables. There he met Janet, and fell in love with her, as did most of Fred's associates. But unlike them, George had withdrawn. He knew he should "do" for himself with "the county" if he married Janet. And he could not face his mother. So he sulked like a fish under the bank, half suspicious that he is being angled for. So ignorant of his fellow-

creatures was George that there actually had been a moment when he suspected Janet of trying to "land him," and he did not think any the worse of her.

Then, after months of sullen indecision, he suddenly rushed upon his fate. That was a week ago.

Anne left her chair as Mrs Trefusis did not answer, and knelt down by the old woman.

"Dear Mrs Trefusis," she said, "the girl is a nice girl, innocent and good, and without a vestige of conceit."

"She has nothing to be conceited about that I can see."

"Oh! yes. She might be conceited about marrying George. It is an amazing match for her. And she might be conceited about her beauty. I should be if I had that face."

"My dear, you are twenty times as good-looking, because you look what you are—a lady. She looks what she is—a ——" Something in Anne's steady eyes disconcerted Mrs Trefusis, and she did not finish

the sentence. She twitched her hands restlessly, and then went on: "And she can't come into a room. She sticks in the door. And she always calls you 'Lady Varney.' She hasn't called a girl a 'gurl' yet, but I know she will. I had thought my son's wife might make up to me a little for all I've gone through—might be a comfort to me—and then I am asked to put up with a vulgarian."

Anne went on in a level voice: "Janet is not in the least vulgar, because she is unpretentious. Middle-class she may be, and is: so was my grandmother; but vulgar she is not. And she is absolutely devoted to George. He is in love with her, but she really loves him."

"So she ought. He is making a great sacrifice for her, and, as I constantly tell him, one he will regret to his dying day."

"On the contrary, he is only sacrificing his own pride and yours to—himself. He is considering only himself. He is marrying only to please himself, not ——" Anne hesitated—"not to please Janet."

"Now you are talking nonsense."

"Yes, I think I am. It felt like sense, but by the time I had put it into words, it turned into nonsense. The little things you notice in Janet's dress and manner can be mitigated, if she is willing to learn."

"She won't be," said Mrs Trefusis, with decision. "Because she is stupid. She will be offended directly she is spoken to. All stupid people are. Now come, Anne! Don't try and make black white. It doesn't help matters. You must admit the girl is stupid."

Anne's gentle, limpid eyes looked deprecatingly into the elder woman's hard, miserable ones.

"I am afraid she is," she said at last, and she coloured painfully.

"And obstinate."

"Are not stupid people always obstinate?"

"No," said Mrs Trefusis. "I am obstinate, but no one could call me stupid."

"It does not prevent stupid people being always obstinate, because obstinate people are not always stupid."

"You think me very obstinate, Anne?" There were tears in the stern old eyes.

"I think, dear, you have got to give way, and as you must, I want you to do it with a good grace, before you estrange George from you, and before that unsuspecting girl has found out that you loathe the marriage."

"If she were not as dense as a rhinoceros, she would see that now."

"How fortunate, in that case, that she is dense. It gives you a better chance with her. Make her like you. You can, you know. She is worth liking."

"All my life," said Mrs Trefusis, "be they who they may, I have hated stupid people."

"Oh! no. That is an hallucination. You don't hate George."

Mrs Trefusis shot a lightning glance at her companion, and then smiled grimly. "You are the only person who would dare to say such a thing to me."

"Besides," continued Anne meditatively, "is it so certain that Janet is stupid? She

appears so because she is unformed, ignorant, and because she has never reflected, or been thrown with educated people. She has not come to herself. She will never learn anything by imagination or perception, for she seems quite devoid of them. But I think she might learn by trouble or happiness, or both. She can feel. Strong feeling would be the turning-point with her, if she has sufficient ability to take advantage of it. Perhaps she has not, and happiness or trouble may leave her as they found her. But she gives me the impression that she *might* alter considerably if she were once thoroughly aroused."

"I can't rouse her. I was not sent into the world to rouse pretty horse-breakers."

If Anne was doubtful as to what Mrs Trefusis had been sent into this imperfect world for, she did not show it.

"I don't want you to rouse her. All I want is that you should be kind to her." Anne took Mrs Trefusis' ringed, claw-like hand between both hers. "I do want that very much."

"Well," said Mrs Trefusis, blinking her eyes, "I won't say I won't try. You can always get round me, Anne. Oh! my dear, dear child, if it might only have been you. But of course, just because I had set my heart upon it, I was not to have it. That has been my life from first to last. If I might only have had you. You think me a cross, bitter old woman, and so I am: God knows I have had enough to make me so. But I should not have been so to you."

"You never are so to me. But you see my affections are — is not that the correct expression?—engaged."

"But you are not."

"No. I am as free as air. That is where the difficulty comes in."

"Where is the creature now?"

"In Paris. The *World* chronicles his movements. That is why I take in the *World*. If he had been in London this week, I should not — be here at this moment."

"I suppose he is enormously run after?"

"Oh yes! By others as well as by me; by tons of others younger and better looking than I am."

"Now, Anne, I am absolutely certain that you have never run a yard after him."

"I have never appeared to do so," said Anne, with her faint, enigmatical smile. "The proprieties have been observed. At least by me they have. But I have covered a good deal of ground, nevertheless."

"I don't know what he is made of."

"Well, he is made of money for one thing, and I have not a shilling. He knows that."

"He ought to be only too honoured by your being willing to think of him. In my young days a man of his class would not have had a chance."

"Millionaires get their chance nowadays."

"Then why doesn't he take it?"

"Because," said Anne, her lip quivering, "he thinks I like him for his money. He has got that firmly screwed into his head."

"As if a woman like you would do such a thing."

"Women extremely like me are doing such things all the time. How is he to know I am different?"

"He must be a fool."

"He does not look like one."

"No," said Mrs Trefusis meditatively, "I must own he does not. He has a bullet head. I saw him once at the Duchess of Dundee's last summer. He was pointed out to me as the biggest thing in millionaires since Barnato. But I must confess he was the very last person in the world whom I should have thought you would have looked at—for himself, I mean."

"That is what he thinks."

"He is so very unattractive."

"He is an ugly, forbidding-looking man of forty," said Anne, who had become very pale.

"I should not go as far as that," said Mrs Trefusis, somewhat disconcerted.

"Oh! I can for you!" said Anne, her

quiet eyes flashing. "He is all these things. He is exactly what I would rather not have married. And I think he knows that instinctively, poor man! But in spite of all that, in spite of everything that repels me, I know that we belong to each other. He did not choose to like me, or I to like him. I never had any choice in the matter. When I first saw him I recognised him. I had known him all my life. I had been waiting for him always without knowing it. I never really understood anything till he came. I did not fall in love with him; at least, not in the way I see others do, and as I once did myself years ago. I am not attracted towards him. I am him. And he is me. One can't fall in love with oneself. He is my other self. We are one. We may live painfully apart as we are doing now—he may marry some one else: but the fact remains the same."

Mrs Trefusis did not answer. Love is so rare that when we meet it we realise that we are on holy ground.

"You and he will marry some day," she said at last.

Her thoughts went back to her own youth, and its romantic love and marriage. There was no romance here as she understood it, nothing but a grim reality. But it almost seemed as if love could go deeper without romance.

"I do not see how a misunderstanding can hold together between you."

"You forget mother," said Anne.

Mrs Trefusis had momentarily forgotten her closest friend, the Duchess of Quorn, that notorious match-making mother of a quartette of pretty, well-drilled daughters, all of whom were now advantageously married except Anne—the eldest. And if Anne was not at this moment wedded to George Trefusis it was not owing to want of zeal on the part of both mothers. Mrs Trefusis was irrevocably behind the scenes in Anne's family.

"Mother ought by nature to have been a man and a cricketer," said Anne, "instead of the mother of many daughters. She

is 'game' to the last, she is a hard hitter, and she will run till she drops on the chance of any catch. But her bowling is her strong point. Young men have not a chance with her. Her style may not be dignified, but her eye is extraordinary. Harry Lestrange did his silly, panic-stricken best, but—he is married to Cecily now."

"Did he really try to get out of it?"

"He did. He liked Cecily a little; he had certainly flirted with her when she came in his way, but he never made the least effort to meet her, and he did not want to marry her."

"And Cecily?"

"Cecily did not dislike him. She was only nineteen, and she had—so she told me—always hoped for curly hair; and of course Harry's is quite straight, what little there is of it. She shed a few tears about that, but she did as she was told. They are a nice-looking young couple. They write quite happily. I daresay it will do very well. But, you see, unfortunately,

Harry was a friend of Mr Vanbrunt's, and I know Harry consulted him as to how to get out of it. Well, directly mother's attention was off Harry, she found out about Mr Vanbrunt; how I don't know, but she did. Poor mother! she has a heart somewhere. It is her sporting instincts which are too strong for her. When she found out, she came into my room and kissed me, and cried, and said love was everything, and what did looks matter, and, for her part, if a man was a good man, she thought it was of no importance if he had not had a father. Think of mother's saying that, after marrying poor father? But she was quite sincere. Mother never minds contradicting herself. There is nothing petty about her. She cried, and I cried too. We seemed to be nearer to each other than we had been for years. I was the last daughter left at home, and she actually said she did not want to part with me. I think she felt it just for the moment, for she had had a good deal of worry with some of the sons-in-law, especially Harry.

But after a little bit she came to herself, and she gave me such advice. Oh, such advice! Some of it was excellent—that was the worst of it—but it was all from the standpoint of the woman stalking the man. And she asked me several gimlet questions about Mr Vanbrunt. She said I had not made any mistake so far, but that I must be very careful. She was like a tiger that has tasted blood. She said it was almost like marrying royalty—marrying such wealth as that. I believe he has a property in Africa rather larger than England. But she said that I was her dear child, and she thought it might be done. I implored her not to do anything—to leave him alone. But the truth is, mother had been so successful that she had got rather beyond herself, and she fancied she could do anything. Father had often prophesied that some day she would overreach herself. However, nothing would stop her. So she settled down to it. You know what mother's bowling is. It did for Harry—but this time it did for me."

"Mr Vanbrunt saw through it?"

"From the first moment. He saw he was being hunted down. He bore it at first, and then he withdrew. I can't prove it, but I am morally certain that mother cornered him and had a talk with him one day, and told him I cared for him, and thought him very handsome. Mother sticks at nothing. After that he went away."

"Poor man!"

"She asked him in May to stay with us in Scotland in September, but he has refused. I found she had given a little message from me which I never sent. Poor, poor mother, and poor me!"

"And poor millionaire! Surely if he has any sense he must see that it is your mother and not you who is hunting him."

"He is aware that Cecily did as she was told. He probably thinks I could be coerced into marrying him. He may know a great deal about finance, and stocks, and all those weary things, but he knows very

little about women. He has not taken much account of them so far."

"His day will come," said Mrs Trefusis. "What a nuisance men are! I wish they were all at the bottom of the sea."

"If they were," said Anne, with her rueful little smile, "mother would order a diving-bell at once."

CHAPTER III

"O mighty love, O passion and desire,
That bound the cord."
—*The Heptameron.*

JANET'S mother had died when Janet was a toddling child. It is observable in the natural history of heroines that their mothers almost invariably do die when the heroines to whom they have given birth are toddling children. Had Di Vernon a mother, or Evelina, or Jane Eyre, or Diana of the Crossways, or Aurora Leigh? Dear Elizabeth Bennett certainly had one whom we

shall not quickly forget—but Elizabeth is an exception. She only proves the rule for the majority of heroines. Fathers they have sometimes, generally of a feeble or callous temperament, never of any use in extricating their daughters from the entanglements that early beset them. And occasionally they have chivalrous or disreputable brothers.

So it is with a modest confidence in the equipment of my heroine that I now present her to the reader denuded of both parents, and domiciled under the roof of a brother who was not only disreputable in the imagination of Mrs Trefusis, but, as I hate half measures, was so in reality.

If Janet had been an introspective person, if she had ever asked herself whence she came and whither she was going, if the cruelty of life and nature had ever forced themselves upon her notice, if the apparent incompleteness of this pretty world had ever daunted her, I think she must have been a very unhappy woman. Her surroundings were vulgar, coarse, without a redeeming

gleam of culture, even in its crudest forms, without a spark of refined affection. Nevertheless her life grew up white and clean in it, as a hyacinth will build its fragrant bell tower in the window of a tavern, in a stale atmosphere of smoke and beer and alcohol. Janet was self-contained as a hyacinth. She unfolded from within. She asked no questions of life. That she had had a happy, contented existence was obvious; an existence spent much in the open air, in which tranquil, practical duties well within her reach had been all that had been required of her. Her brother Fred, several years older than herself, had one redeeming point. He was fond of her and proud of her. He did not understand her, but she was what he called "a good sort."

Janet was one of those blessed women—whose number seems to diminish, while that of her highly-strung sisters painfully increases—who make no large demand on life, or on their fellow-creatures. She took both as they came. Her uprightness and integrity were her own, as was the simple

religion which she followed blindfold. She expected little of others, and exacted nothing. She had, of course, had lovers in plenty. She wished to be married and to have children — many children. In her quiet ruminating mind she had names ready for a family of ten. But until George came she had always said "No." When pressed by her brother as to why some particularly eligible *parti*—such as Mr Gorst, the successful trainer—had been refused, she could never put forward any adequate reason, and would say at last that she was very happy as she was.

Then George came, a different kind of man from any she had known, at least different from any in his class who had offered marriage. He represented to her all that was absent from her own surroundings—refinement, culture. I don't know what Janet can have meant by culture, but years later, when she had picked up words like "culture" and "development," and scattered them across her conversation, she told me he had represented all these glories

to her. And he was a little straighter than the business men she associated with, a good deal straighter than her brother. Perhaps, after all, that was the first attraction he had for her. Janet was straight herself. She fell in love with George.

"L'amour est une source naïve." It was a very naïve spring in Janet's heart, though it welled up from a considerable depth; a spring not even to be poisoned by her brother's outrageous delight at the engagement, or his congratulations on the wisdom of her previous steadfast refusal of the eligible Mr Gorst.

"This beats all," he said; "I never thought you would pull it off, Janet. I thought he was too big a fish to land. And to think you will queen it at Easthope Park."

Janet was not in the least perturbed by her brother's remarks. She was accustomed to them. He always talked like that. She vaguely supposed she should some day "queen it" at Easthope. The expression did not offend her. The reflection in her

mind was: "George must love me very much to have chosen me, when all the most splendid ladies in the land would be glad to have him."

And now, as she walked on this Sunday afternoon in the long, quiet gardens of Easthope, she felt her cup was full. She looked at her affianced George with shy adoration from under the brim of her violent new hat, and made soft answers to him when he spoke.

George was not a great talker. He trusted mainly to an occasional ejaculation, his meaning aided by pointing with a stick.

A covey of partridges ran with one consent across the smooth lawn at a little distance.

"Jolly little beggars," said George, with explanatory stick.

She liked the flowers best, but he did not, so he took her down to the pool below the rose garden, where the eager brook ran through a grating, making a little water prison in which solemn, portly personages might be seen moving.

"See 'em?" said George, pointing as usual.

"Yes," said Janet.

"That's a three-pounder."

"Yes."

That was all the stream said to them.

She lingered once more in the rose-garden when he would have drawn her onwards towards the ferrets, and George, willing to humour her, got out his knife and chose a rose for her. Has any woman really lived who has not stood once in silence in the June sunshine with her lover, and watched him pick for her a red rose which is not as other roses, a rose which understands? Amid all the world of roses, did the raiment of God touch just that one, as He walked in His garden in the cool of the evening? And did the Divine love imprisoned in it reach forth towards the human love of the two lovers, and blend them for a moment with itself?

"You are my rose," said George, and he put his arm round her, and drew her to him with a rough tenderness.

"Yes," said Janet, not knowing to what she said "yes," but vaguely assenting to him in everything. And they leaned together by the sun-dial, soft cheek against tanned cheek, soft hand in hard hand.

Could anything in life be more commonplace than two lovers and a rose? Have we not seen such groups portrayed on lozenge-boxes, and on the wrappers of French plums?

And yet, what remains commonplace if Love but touch it as he passes?

Let Memory open her worn picture-book, where it opens of itself, and make answer.

. . . . .

Anne saw the lovers, but they did not see her, as she ran down the steps cut in the turf to the little bridge across the trout stream. She had left Mrs Trefusis composed into a resigned nap, and she felt at liberty to carry her aching spirit to seek comfort and patience by the brook.

Anne, the restrained, disciplined, dignified woman of the world, threw herself

down on her face in the short, sun-warm grass.

Is the heart ever really tamed? As the years pass we learn to keep it behind bolts and bars. We marshal it forth on set occasions, to work manacled under our eyes, and then goad it back to its cell again. But is it ever anything but a caged Arab of the desert, a wild fierce prisoner in chains, a captive Samson with shorn locks which grow again, who may one day snap his fetters, and pull down the house over our heads.

Anne set her teeth. Her passionate heart beat hard against the kind bosom of the earth. How we return to her, our Mother Earth, when life is too difficult or too beautiful for us! How we fling ourselves upon her breast, upon her solitude, finding courage to encounter joy, insight to bear sorrow. First faint foreshadowing of the time when we, "short-lived as fire, and fading as the dew," shall go back to her entirely.

Anne lay very still. She did not cry.

She knew better than that. Tears are for the young. She hid her convulsed face in her hands, and shuddered violently from time to time.

How long was she to bear it? How long was she to drag herself by sheer force through the days, endless hour by hour? How long was she to hate the dawn? How long was she to endure this intermittent agony, which released her only to return? Was there to be no reprieve from the invasion of this one thought? Was there no escape from this man? Was not her old friend the robin on his side? The meadow-sweet feathered the hedgerow. The white clover was in the grass, together with the little purple orchid. Were they not all his confederates? Had he bribed the robin to sing of him, and the scent in the white clover against her cheek to goad her back to acute remembrance of him, and the pine-trees to speak continually of him?

"He is rich enough," said poor Anne to herself, with something between a laugh and a sob.

But he had not bribed the brook. Tormented spirits ere now have walked in dry places, seeking rest and finding none. But has any outcast from happiness sought rest by running water, and found it not?

CHAPTER IV

"I have not sinned against the God of Love."
—EDMUND GOSSE.

WHEN Anne returned to the house an hour or two later she heard an alien voice and strident laugh through the open door of the drawing-room as she crossed the hall, and she crept noiselessly upstairs towards her own room. She felt as if she were quite unable to bear so soon again the strain of that small family party. But halfway up the stairs her conscience pricked her. Was all well in the drawing-room? She sighed, and went slowly downstairs again.

All was not well there.

Mrs Trefusis was sitting frozen upright in her high-backed chair, listening with congealed civility to the would-be-easy conversation, streaked with nervous laughter, of a young man. Anne saw at a glance that he must be Janet's brother, and she instinctively divined that, on the strength of his sister's engagement, he was now making, unasked, his first call on Mrs Trefusis.

Fred Black was a tall, sufficiently handsome man seen apart from Janet. He could look quite distinguished striding about in well-made breeches among a group of farmers and dealers on market-day. But taken away from his appropriate setting, and inserted suddenly into the Easthope drawing-room, in Janet's proximity, he changed like a chameleon, and appeared dilapidated, in spite of being over-dressed, irretrievably second-rate, and unwholesome-looking. He was so like his sister that a certain indefinable commonness, not of breeding but of character, and a suggestion of cunning and insolence observable in him,

were thrown into high relief by the strong superficial resemblance of feature between them.

Janet was sitting motionless and embarrassed before the tea-table, waiting for the tea to become of brandied strength. Mrs Trefusis, possibly mindful of Anne's appeal, had evidently asked her future daughter-in-law to pour out tea for her. And Janet, to the instant annoyance of the elder woman, had carefully poured cream into each empty cup as a preliminary measure.

George was standing in sullen silence by the tea-table, vaguely aware that something was wrong, and wishing that Fred had not called.

The strain relaxed as Anne entered.

Anne came in quickly, with a gentle expectancy of pleasure in her grave face. She gave the impression of one who has hastened back to congenial society.

If this be hypocrisy, Anne was certainly a hypocrite. There are some natures, simple and patient, who quickly perceive and

gladly meet the small occasions of life. Anne had come into the world willing to serve, and she did not mind whom she served. She did gracefully, even gaily, the things that others did not think worth while. This was, of course, no credit to her. She was made so. Just as some of us are so fastidiously, so artistically constituted as to make the poor souls who have to live with us old before their time.

Mrs Trefusis' face became less knotted. Janet gave a sigh of relief. George said: "Hi, Ponto! How are ye?" and affably stirred up his sleeping retriever with his foot.

Anne sat down by Janet, advised her that Mrs Trefusis did not like cream, and then, while she swallowed a cup of tea sweetened to nausea, devoted herself to Fred.

His nervous laugh became less strident, his conversation less pendulous between a paralysed constraint and a galvanized familiarity. Anne loved horses, but she

did not talk of them to Fred, though, from his appearance, it seemed as if no other subject had ever occupied his attention.

Why is it that a passion for horses writes itself as plainly as a craving for alcohol on the faces of the men and women who live for them?

Anne spoke of the Boer war in its most obvious aspects, mentioned a few of its best-known incidents, of which even he could not be ignorant. Janet glanced with fond pride at her brother, as he declaimed against the Government for its refusal to buy thousands of hypothetical Kaffir ponies, and as he posted Anne in the private workings of the mind of her cousin, the Prime Minister. Fred had even heard of certain scandals respecting the hospitals for the wounded, and opined with decision that war could not be conducted on rose-water principles, with a bottle of eau-de-Cologne at each man's pillow.

"Fine woman that!" said Fred to Janet afterwards, as she walked a few steps with him on his homeward way. "Woman of

the world. Knows her way about. And how she holds herself! A little thin perhaps, and not much colour, but shows her breeding. Who is she?"

"Lady Varney."

"Married?"

"N—no."

"H'm! Look here, Janet. You suck up to her. And you look how she does things, and notice the way she talks. She reads the papers, takes an interest in politics. That's what a man likes. You do the same. And don't you knock under to that old bag of bones too much. Hold your own. We are as good as she is."

"Oh, no, Fred; we're not."

"Oh! it's all rot about family. It's not worth a rush. We are just the same as them. A gentleman's a gentleman whether he lives in a large house or a small one, and the real snobs are the people who think different. Does it make you less of a lady because you live in an unpretentious way? Not a bit of it. Don't talk to me."

Janet remained silent. She felt there was some hitch in her brother's reasoning, which, until to-day, had appeared to her irrefutable, but she could not see where the hitch lay.

"You must stand up to the old woman, I tell you. I don't want you to be rude, but you let her know that she is the dowager. Don't give way. Didn't you see how I tackled her?"

"I'm not clever like you."

"Well, you are a long sight prettier," said her brother proudly. "And I've brought some dollars with me for the trousseau. You go to the Brands to-morrow, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't pay for anything you can help. Tell them to put it down. Get this Lady Varney or Mrs Brand to recommend the shops and dressmakers, and then they will not dun us for money."

"Oh, Fred! Are you so hard up?"

"Hard up!" said Fred, his face becoming suddenly pinched and old. "Hard

up!" He drew in his breath. "Oh! I'm all right. At least, yes, just for the moment I'm a bit pressed. Look here, Janet. You and Mrs Brand are old pals. Get Brand," his voice became hoarse, "get Brand to wait a bit. He has my I O U, and he has waited once, but he warned me he would not again. He said it was against his rules; as if rules matter between gentlemen. He's as hard as nails. The I O U falls due next week, and I can't meet it. I don't want any bother till after you are spliced. You and Mrs Brand lay your heads together, and persuade him to wait till you are married, at any rate. He hates me, but he won't want to stand in your light."

"I'll ask him," said Janet, looking earnestly at her brother, but only half understanding why his face was so white and set. "But why don't you take my two thousand and pay him back? I said you could borrow it. I think that would be better than speaking again to Mr Brand, who will never listen."

"No, it wouldn't," said Fred, his hand shaking so violently that he gave up attempting to light a cigarette. He knew that that two thousand, Janet's little fortune, existed only in her imagination. It had existed once; he had had charge of it, but it was gone.

"Ask Brand," he said again. "A man with any gentlemanly feeling cannot refuse a pretty woman anything. I can't. You ask Brand—as if it was to please you. You're pretty enough to wheedle anything out of men. He'll do it."

"I'll ask him," said Janet again, and she sighed as she went back alone to the great house which was one day to be hers. She did not think of that as she looked up at the long lines of stone-mullioned windows. She thought only of her George, and wondered, with a blush of shame, whether Fred had yet borrowed money from him.

Then, as she saw a white figure move past the gallery windows, she remembered Anne, and her brother's advice to her to

make a friend of "Lady Varney." Janet had been greatly drawn towards Anne, after she had got over a certain stolid preliminary impression that Anne was "fine." And Janet had immediately mistaken Anne's tactful kindness to herself for an overture of friendship. Perhaps that is a mistake which many gentle, commonplace souls make, who go through life disillusioned as to the sincerity of certain other attractive, brilliant creatures with whom they have come in momentary contact, to whom they can give nothing, but from whom they have received a generous measure of delicate sympathy and kindness, which they mistook for the prelude of friendship; a friendship which never arrived. It is well for us when we learn the difference between the donations and the subscriptions of those richer than ourselves, when we realize how broad is the way towards a person's kindness, and how many surprisingly inferior individuals are to be met therein; and how strait is the gate, how hard to find, and how

doubly hard, when found, to force it, of that same person's friendship.

Janet supposed that Anne liked her as much as she herself liked Anne, and, being a simple soul, she said to herself, "I think I will go and sit with her a little."

A more experienced person than my poor heroine would have felt that there was not marked encouragement in the civil "Come in" which answered her knock at Anne's door.

But Janet came in smiling, sure of her welcome. Every one was sure of their welcome with Anne.

She was sitting in a low chair by the open window. She had taken off what Janet would have called her "Sunday gown," and had wrapped round her a long, diaphanous white garment, the like of which Janet had never seen. It was held at the neck by a pale green ribbon, cunningly drawn through lace insertion, and at the waist by another wider green ribbon, which fell to the feet. The spreading lace-edged hem showed the point of a green morocco slipper.

Janet looked with respectful wonder at Anne's dressing-gown, and a momentary doubt as to whether her presence was urgently needed vanished. Anne must have been expecting her. She would not have put on that exquisite garment to sit by herself in.

Janet's eyes travelled to Anne's face.

Even the faint, reassuring smile, which did not come the first moment it was summoned, could not disguise the fatigue of that pale face, though it effaced a momentary impatience.

"You are very tired," said Janet. "I wish you were as strong as me."

Janet's beautiful eyes had an admiring devotion in them, and also a certain wistfulness, which appealed to Anne.

"Sit down," she said cordially. "That is a comfortable chair."

"You were reading. Shan't I interrupt you?" said Janet, sitting down nevertheless, and feeling that tact could no further go.

"It does not matter," said Anne, closing

the book, but keeping one slender finger in the place.

"What is your book called?"

"'Inasmuch.'"

"Who wrote it?"

"Hester Gresley."

"I think I've heard of her," said Janet cautiously. "Mrs Smith, our Rector's wife, says that Mr Smith does not approve of her books; they have such a low tone. I think Fred read one of them on a visit once. I haven't time myself for much reading."

Silence.

"I should like," said Janet, turning her clear, wide gaze upon Anne, "I should like to read the books you read, and know the things you know. I should like to—to be like you."

A delicate colour came into Anne's face, and she looked down embarrassed at the volume in her hand.

"Would you read me a little bit?" said Janet. "Not beginning at the beginning, but just going on where you left off."

"I am afraid you might not care for it any more than Mr Smith does."

"Oh! I'm not deeply read like Mr Smith. Is it poetry?"

"No."

"I'm glad it isn't poetry. Is it about love?"

"Yes."

"I used not to care to read about love, but now I think I should like it very much."

A swift emotion passed over Anne's face. She took up the book, and slowly opened it. Janet looked with admiration at her slender hands.

"I wish mine were white like hers," she thought, as she looked at her own far more beautiful but slightly tanned hands, folded together in her lap in an attitude of attention.

Anne hesitated a moment, and then began to read:

"I had journeyed some way in life, I was travel-stained and weary, when I met

Love. In the empty, glaring highway I met him, and we walked in it together. I had not thought he fared in such steep places, having heard he was a dweller in the sheltered gardens, which were not for me. Nevertheless he went with me. I never stopped for him, or turned aside out of my path to seek him, for I had met his counterfeit when I was young, and I distrusted strangers afterwards. And I prayed to God to turn my heart wholly to Himself, and to send Love away, lest he should come between me and Him. But when did God hearken to any prayer of mine?

"And Love was grave and stern. And as we walked he showed me the dew upon the grass, and the fire in the dew, the things I had seen all my life and had never understood. And he drew the rainbow through his hand. I was one with the snowdrop and with the thunderstorm. And we went together upon the sea, swiftly up its hurrying mountains, swiftly down into its rushing valleys. And I was one with

the sea. And all fear ceased out of my life, and a great awe dwelt with me instead. And Love wore a human face. But I knew that was for a moment only. Did not Christ the same?

"And Love showed me the hearts of my brothers in the crowd. And, last of all, he showed me myself, with whom I had lived in ignorance. And I was humbled.

"And then Love, who had given me all, asked for all. And I gave reverence, and patience, and faith, and hope, and intuition, and service. I even gave him truth. I put my hands under his feet. But he said it was not enough. So I gave him my heart. That was the last I had to give.

"And Love took it in a great tenderness and smote it. And in the anguish the human face of Love vanished away.

"And afterwards, long years afterwards, when I was first able to move and look up, I saw Love, who, as I thought, was gone, keeping watch beside me. And I saw his face clear, without the human veil between me and it. And it was the Face of God.

And I saw that Love and God are one, and that, because of His exceeding glory, He had been constrained to take flesh even as Christ took it, so that my dim eyes might be able to apprehend Him. And I saw that it was He and He only who had walked with me from the first."

. . . . .

Anne laid down the book. She looked fixedly out across the quiet gardens, with their long shadows, to the still, sun-lit woods beyond. Her face changed, as the face of one who, in patient endurance, has long rowed against the stream, and who at last lets the benign, constraining current take her whither it will. The look of awed surrender seldom seen on a living face, seldom absent from the faces of the newly dead, rested for a moment on Anne's.

. . . . .

"I don't think," said Janet, "I quite understand what it means, because I was not sure whether it was a lady or a gentleman that was speaking."

Anne started violently, and turned her colourless face towards the voice. It seemed to recall her from a great distance. She had forgotten Janet. She had been too far off to hear what she had said.

"I like the bit about giving Love our hearts," said Janet tentatively. "It means something the same as the sermon did this morning, doesn't it, about not laying up our treasure upon earth?"

There was a silence.

"Yes," said Anne gently, her voice and face quivering a little, "perhaps it does. I had not thought of it in that way till you mentioned it, but I see what you mean."

"That we ought to put religion first."

"Y—yes."

"I am so glad you read that to me," continued Janet comfortably, "because I had an idea that you and I should feel the same about"—she hesitated—"about love. I mean," she corrected herself, "you would, if you were engaged."

"I have never been engaged," said Anne,

in the tone of one who gently but firmly closes a subject.

"When you are," said Janet, peacefully pursuing the topic, and looking at her with tender confidence, "you will feel like me, that it's—just everything."

"Shall I?"

"I don't know any poetry, except two lines that George copied out for me—

> 'Don't love me at all,
> Or love me all in all.'"

Anne winced, but recovered herself instantly.

"It's like that with me," continued Janet. "It's all in all. And then I am afraid that *is* laying up treasures on earth, isn't it?"

"Not if you love God more because you love George."

Janet ruminated. You could almost hear her mind at work upon the suggestion, as you hear a coffee-mill respond to a handful of coffee berries.

"I think I do," she said at last, and she added below her breath, "I thank God all

the time for sending George, and I pray I may be worthy of him."

Anne's eyes filled with sudden tears—not for herself.

"I hope you will be very happy," she said, laying her hand on Janet's. It seemed to Anne a somewhat forlorn hope.

Janet's hand closed slowly over Anne's.

"I think we shall," she said. "And yet I sometimes doubt, when I remember that I am not his equal. I knew that in a way from the first, but I see it more and more since I came here. I don't wonder Mrs Trefusis doesn't think me good enough."

"Mrs Trefusis does not take fancies quickly."

"It is not that," said Janet. "There's two ways of not being good enough. Till now I have only thought of one way, of not being good enough *in myself*, like such things as temper. I'm not often angry, but if I am I stay angry. I don't alter. I was once angry with Fred for a year. I've thought a great deal about that since I've cared for George. And sometimes I fancy

I'm rather slow. I daresay you haven't noticed it, but Mrs Smith often remarks upon it. She always has something to say on any subject, just like you have; but somehow I haven't."

"I don't know Mrs Smith."

"I wish you did. She's wonderful. She says she learnt it when she went out so much in the West End before her marriage."

"Indeed!"

"But since I've been here I see there's another way I'm not good enough, which sets Mrs Trefusis against me. I don't think she would mind if I told lies and had a bad temper, and couldn't talk like Mrs Smith, if I was good enough in *her* way — I mean if I was high-born like you."

The conversation seemed to contain as many pins as a well-stocked pincushion. The expression "high-born" certainly had a sharp point, but Anne made no sign as it was driven in. She considered a moment, and then said, as if she had decided to

risk something: "You are right. Mrs Trefusis would have been pleased if you had been my sister. You perhaps think that very worldly. I think it is very natural."

"I wish I were your sister," said Janet, who might be reckoned on for remaining half a field behind.

Anne sighed, and leaned back in her chair.

"If I were your sister," continued Janet, wholly engrossed in getting her slow barge heavily under way, "you would have told me a number of little things which — I don't seem to know."

"You could easily learn some of them," said Anne, "and that would greatly please Mrs Trefusis."

"Could you tell me of anything in especial?"

"Well! For instance — I don't mind myself in the least—but it would be better not to call me 'Lady Varney.'"

"I did not know you would like me to call you 'Anne.'"

"You are quite right. We do not know each other well enough."

"Then what ought I to call you?"

"My friends call me 'Lady Anne.'"

"Dear me!" said Janet, astonished. "There's Lady Alice Thornton. She married Mr Thornton, our member. Fred sold him a hunter. And she is sometimes called 'Lady Alice Thornton' and sometimes 'Lady Thornton.' Mrs Smith says——"

"Then," continued Anne, who seemed indisposed to linger on the subject, "it would please Mrs Trefusis if you came into a room with more courage."

Janet stared at her adviser round-eyed.

"It is shy work, isn't it?" said Anne. "I always had a great difficulty in getting into a room myself when I was your age. (O Anne! Anne!) I mean, in getting well into the middle. But I saw I ought to try, and not to hesitate near the door, because, you see, it obliges old ladies, and people like Mrs Trefusis, who is rather lame, to come nearly to the door to meet us. And we young ones ought to go

up to them, even if it makes us feel shy."

"I never thought of that," said Janet. "I will remember those two things always. Mrs Smith always comes in very slow, but then she's a married woman, and she says she likes to give people time to realise her. I will watch how you come in. I will try and copy you in everything. And if I am in doubt, may I ask you?"

Anne laughed, and rose lightly.

"Do," she said, "if you think I could be of any use on these trivial matters. I live among trivialities. But remember always that they *are* trivial. The only thing that is of any real importance in this uphill world is to love and be loved. You will know that when you are my age."

And Anne put her arm round the tall young figure for a moment, and kissed her. And then suddenly, why she knew not, Janet discovered, even while Anne stood smiling at her, that the interview was over.

It seemed a pity, for, when Janet had reached her own room, she remembered that she had intended to consult Anne as to the advisability of cutting her glorious hair into a fringe, like Mrs Smith's.

. . . . .

Anne and Janet travelled together to London next day, and on the journey Janet laid before Anne, in all its bearings, the momentous question of her hair. Fred had said she would never look up to date till she cut a fringe. George had opined that her hair looked very nice as it was, while Mrs Smith had asseverated that it was impossible to mix in good society, or find a hat to suit the face, without one.

Anne settled once and for all that Janet's hair, parted and waving naturally, like the Venus of Milo's, was not to be touched. She became solemnly severe on the subject, as she saw Janet was still wavering. And she even offered to help Janet with her trousseau, to take her to Vernon, her own tailor, and to her own hatter and dress-

maker. Janet had no conception what a sacrifice of time that offer meant to a person of endless social engagements like Anne, who was considered one of the best-dressed women in London.

But to Anne's secret amusement and thankfulness, this offer was gratefully declined in an embarrassed manner.

Janet's great friend, Mrs Macalpine Brand, to whose flat in Lowndes Mansions she was now on her way, had offered to help her with her trousseau. Did Lady Var—Anne know Mrs Macalpine Brand? She went out a great deal in London, so perhaps she might have met her. And she was always beautifully dressed.

Anne remembered vaguely a certain overdressed, would-be-smart, insufferable Mrs Brand, who had made bare-faced but fruitless attempts to scrape acquaintance with herself when she and Anne had been on the same committee.

"I have met a very pretty Mrs Brand," she said, "when I was working with Mrs Forrester. She had an excellent head for

business—and had she not rather a peculiar Christian name?"

"Cuckoo."

"Yes, that was it. She helped Mrs Forrester's charity most generously when it was in debt."

"She is my greatest friend," said Janet, beaming. "I shall be staying with her all this next fortnight. May I bring her with me when I come to tea with you?"

Anne hesitated half a second before she said, "Do."

She was glad afterwards that she had said it, for it pleased Janet, and poor little Mrs Macalpine Brand never took advantage of it. Even at that moment as they spoke of her, she was absorbed, to the shutting out even of plans for social advancement, in more pressing subjects.

The two girls parted at Victoria, and the last time Anne saw Janet's face, in its halo of happiness, was as Janet nodded to her through the window of the four-wheeler, which bore her away to her friend Mrs Brand.

CHAPTER V

"Tous les hommes sont menteurs, inconstants, faux, bavards, hypocrites, orgueilleux, ou lâches, méprisables et sensuels : toutes les femmes sont perfides, artificieuses, vaniteuses, curieuses et dépravées : . . . mais il y a au monde une chose sainte et sublime, c'est l'union de deux de ces êtres si imparfaits et si affreux." —ALFRED DE MUSSET.

As the four-wheeler neared Lowndes Square the traffic became blocked, not by carriages, but by large numbers of people on foot. At last the cabman drew to the side, uncorked himself from the box, and came to the window.

"Is it Lowndes Mansions as you're a-asking for?" he said.

"Yes," said Janet.

"Why, it's there as the fire was yesterday."

"The fire!"

"Yes! The top floors is mostly burnt out. You can't get a wehicle near it."

"Were any lives lost?" said Janet. The Brands lived on one of the upper floors.

"No, miss," said a policeman, approaching, urbane, helpful, not averse to imparting information.

Janet explained that she was on her way to stay in the Mansions, and the policeman, who said that other "parties" had already arrived with the same object but could not be taken in, advised her to turn back and go with her luggage to one of the private hotels in Sloane Street, until she could, as he expressed it, "turn round."

Janet did as she was bid, and half an hour later made her way on foot through the crowd to the entrance of Lowndes Mansions.

The hall porter recognised her, for she had frequently stayed with the Brands, and Janet's face was not quickly forgotten. He bade the policeman who barred the entrance let her pass.

The central hall, with its Oriental hangings and sham palms, was crowded with people. Idle, demoralized housemaids belonging to

the upper floors, whose sphere of work was gone, stood together in whispering groups watching the spectacle. Grave men in high hats and over-long buttoned-up frock-coats greeted each other silently, and then produced passes which admitted them to the jealously guarded iron staircase. The other staircase was burnt out at the top, though from the hall it showed no trace of anything but of the water which yesterday had flowed down it in waves, and which still oozed from the heavy pile stair-carpet, which the salvage men were beginning to take up.

The hall porter and the unemployed lift man stood together, silent, stupefied, broken with fatigue, worn out with answering questions.

"Are Mr and Mrs Brand all right?" gasped Janet, thrilled by the magnitude of the unseen disaster above, which seemed to strike roots of horror down to the basement.

"Every one is all right," said the lift man automatically. "No lives lost. Two residents shook. One leg broke

hamong the hemployees — compound fracture."

"Mrs Brand was shook," said the hall porter callously. "She had a fall."

"Where is she now?" enquired Janet.

The hall porter looked at her apathetically, and continued: "Mr Brand was taking 'orse exercise in the Park. Mrs Brand was still in her bedroom. The fire broke out, cause unbeknownst, at ten o'clock yesterday morning precisely. Ten by the barracks clock it was. The hemployees worked the hose until the first hingine arrived at quarter past."

"Twenty past," corrected the lift man.

"And Mrs Brand?" said Janet again.

"Mrs Brand must 'ave been dressing, for she was in her dressing-gown, and she must ha' run down the main staircase afore it got well alight; at least, she was found unconscious-like three flights down. Some say as she was mazed by the smoke, and some say as she fell over the banisters."

"The banisters is gone," said the lift man.

"Where is she now? Where is Mr Brand? I must see him at once," said Janet, at last realizing that the history of the fire would go on for ever.

"Mrs Brand was took into the billiard-room," said the lift man. "Mr Brand is with her, and the doctor. There! The doctor is coming out now."

A grey-haired man shot out through the crowd, ran down the steps, and disappeared into a brougham privileged to remain at the entrance.

"Take me to Mr Brand this instant," said Janet, shaking the hall porter by the arm.

The man looked as if he would have been surprised at her vehemence if there were any spring of surprise left in him, but it had obviously run down from over-winding. He slowly led the way through a swing door, and down a dark passage lit by electric light. At a large ground-glass door with "Billiard-Room" on it he stopped, and tapped.

There was no answer.

Janet opened the door, went in, and closed it behind her.

She almost stumbled against Mr Brand, who was standing with his back towards her, his face to the wall, in the tiny ante-chamber, bristling with empty pegs, which led into the billiard-room.

It was dark save for the electric light in the passage, which shone feebly through the ground-glass door.

Mr Brand turned slowly as Janet almost touched him. His death-white face was the only thing visible. He did not speak. Janet gazed at him horror-struck.

Gradually, as her eyes became accustomed to the dim light, she saw the little dapper, familiar figure, with its immaculate frock-coat, and corseted waist, and the lean, sallow, wrinkled face, with its retreating forehead and dyed hair, and waxed, turned-up moustaches. One of the waxed ends had been bent, and drooped forlornly, grotesquely. It was perhaps inevitable that the money-lender should be nicknamed "Monkey Brand,"

a name pronounced by many with a sneer not devoid of fear.

"How is she?" said Janet at last.

"She is dying," said Monkey Brand, his chin shaking. "Her back is broken."

A nurse in cap and apron silently opened the inner door into the billiard-room.

"Mrs Brand is asking for you, sir," she said gently.

"I will come," he said, and he went back into the billiard-room.

The nurse looked enquiringly at Janet.

"I am Mrs Brand's friend," said Janet. "She is expecting me."

"She takes it very hard now, poor thing," said the nurse; "and she was so brave at first."

And they both went into the billiard-room, and remained standing at the further end of it.

It was a large, gaudily-decorated room, adorned with sporting prints, and lit by a skylight, on to which opaque bodies, evidently fallen from a height, lay in blots, starring the glass.

The billiard-table was littered with doctors' appliances, and at the end near the door the nurse had methodically arranged a line of towels and basins, with a tin can of hot water and a bucket swathed in flannel with ice in it.

The large room, with its glaring upper light, was hot and still, and smelt of stale smoke and chloroform.

At the further end, on an improvised bed of mattresses and striped sofa cushions, a white, rigid figure was lying, the eyes fixed on the skylight.

Monkey Brand knelt down by his wife, and bending over her, kissed, without raising it, one of the pale clenched hands.

"Cuckoo," he said, and until she heard him speak it seemed to Janet that she had never known to what heights tenderness can reach.

His wife turned her eyes slowly upon him, and looked at him. In her eyes, dark with coming death, there was a great yearning towards her husband, and

behind the yearning an anguish unspeakable. Janet shrank before it. The fear of death never cut so deep as that.

A cry, uncouth, terrible, as of one pushed past the last outpost of endurance to the extremity of agony, rent the quiet room.

"I cannot bear it," she wailed. And she, who could not raise her hands, to which death had come already, raised them once above her head.

They fell heavily, lifelessly, striking her husband's face.

"I would die for you if I might," said Monkey Brand, and he hid his face against the hand that had struck him.

Cuckoo looked at the bowed, blue-black head, and her wide eyes wandered away past it, set in the vacancy of despair. They fell on Janet.

"Who is that?" she said suddenly.

The nurse brought Janet forward.

"You remember me, Cuckoo?" said Janet gently, her calm smile a little tremulous, her face white and beautiful as that of an angel.

"It is Janet. Thank God!" said Cuckoo, and she suddenly burst into tears.

They passed quickly.

"I have no time for tears," said Cuckoo, smiling faintly at her husband, as he wiped them away with a shaking brown hand. "Janet is come. I must speak to her a little quite alone."

"You would not send me from you?" said Monkey Brand, his face twitching. "You would not be so hard on me, Cuckoo?"

"Yes," she said, "I would."

The pretty, vulgar, dying face, under its crooked fringe, was illuminated. A sort of shadow of Cuckoo's hard little domineering manner had come back to her.

"I must be alone with Janet for a little bit, quite alone. You and the nurse will go outside, and wait till Janet comes to you. And then," she looked at her husband with tender love, "you will come back to me, and stay with me to the last."

He still hesitated.

"Go now, Arthur," she said, "and take nurse with you."

The habit of obedience to her whim, her fancy, her slightest wish, was ingrained years deep in him. He got upon his feet, signed to the nurse, and left the room with her.

"Is the door shut?" said Cuckoo.

"Yes."

"Go and make sure."

Janet went to the door, and came back.

"It is shut."

"Kneel down by me. I can't speak loud."

Janet knelt down.

"Now listen to me. I'm dying. I'm not going to die this minute, because I won't; but all the same it's coming. I can't hold on. There is no time for being surprised, or for explanations. There's no time for anything, except for you to listen to me, and do something for me quickly. Will you do it?"

"Yes," said Janet.

Cuckoo looked for a moment at the innocent, fair face above her, and a faint colour stained her cheek. But she remembered her husband, and summoned her old courage. She spoke quickly, with the clearness and precision which had made her such an excellent woman of business, so invaluable on the committees of fashionable charities.

"I am a bad woman, Janet. I have concealed it from you, and from every one. Arthur — has never guessed it. Don't shudder. Don't turn away. There's not time. Keep all that for later—when I'm gone. And don't drive me to distraction by thinking this is a dying hallucination. I know what I am saying, and I, who have lied so often, am driven to speak the truth at last."

"Don't," said Janet. "If it's true, don't say it, but let it die with you. Don't break Mr Brand's heart now at the last moment."

Cuckoo's astute eyes dwelt on Janet's face. How slow she was! What a

blunt instrument had Fate vouchsafed to her.

"I speak to save him," she said. "Don't interrupt again, but listen. It all goes back a long way. I was forced into marrying Arthur. I disliked him, for I was in love with some one else—some one, as I see now, not fit to black his boots. I was straight when I married Arthur, but—I did not stay straight afterwards. Arthur is a hard man, but he was good and tender to me always, and he trusted me absolutely. I deceived him—for years. The child is not Arthur's. Arty is not Arthur's. I never was really sorry until a year ago, when he—the other—left me for some one else. He said he had fallen in love with a good woman—a snowflake." Even now Cuckoo set her teeth at the remembrance of that speech. But she hurried on. "That was the time I fell ill. And Arthur nursed me. You don't know what Arthur is. I never seemed to have noticed before. Other people fail, but Arthur never fails. And I seemed

to come to myself. I could not bear him out of my sight. And ever since I have loved him, as I thought people only loved in poetry books. I saw he was the only one. And I thought he would never know. If he did, it would break his heart and mine, wherever I was."

Cuckoo waited a moment, and then went on with methodical swiftness:

"But I never burnt the—the other one's letters. I always meant to, and I always didn't. It has been in my mind ever since I was ill to burn them. I never thought I should die like this. I put it off. The truth is, I could not bear to look at them, and remember how I'd—but I meant to do it. I knew when I came to myself at the foot of the stairs that I was dying, but I did not really mind—except for leaving Arthur, for he told me all our flat was burnt and everything in it, and I only grieved at leaving him. But this morning, when the place was cold enough for people to go up, Arthur told me—he thought it would

please me—that my sitting-room, and part of the other rooms, were still standing with everything in them, and he heard that my picture was not even touched. It hangs over the Italian cabinet. But when I heard it I thought my heart would break, for the letters are in the Italian cabinet, and I knew that some day when I am gone—perhaps not for a long time, but some day—Arthur would open that cabinet—my business papers are in it, too—and would find the letters."

Cuckoo's weak, metallic voice weakened yet more.

"And he would see I had deceived him for years, and that Arty is not his child. Arthur was so pleased when Arty was born."

There was an awful silence; the ice dripped in the pail.

"I don't mind what happens to me," said Cuckoo, "or what hell I go to, if only Arthur might stay loving me when I'm gone, as he always has—from the very first."

"What do you want me to do?" said Janet.

"I want you to go up to the flat without being seen, and burn those letters. Try and go up by the main staircase. They may let you if you bluff them; I could do it;—and it may not be burnt out at the top as they say. If it really is burnt out, you must go up by the iron staircase. If they won't let you pass, bribe the policeman: you must go up all the same. The letters are in the lowest left-hand drawer of the Italian cabinet. The key—O my God! The key! Where is the key?"

Cuckoo's mind, brought to bay, rose unflinching.

"The key is on the pearl chain that I wear every day. But where is the chain? Let me think. I had it on. I know I had it on. I wear the pearls against my neck, under my gown. I was in my dressing-gown. Then I had it on. Look on the billiard-table."

Janet looked.

"Look on the mantelpiece. I saw the nurse put something down there which she took off me."

Janet looked. "There is a miniature of Arty on a ribbon."

"I had it in my hand when the alarm reached me. Look on me. Perhaps I have got it on still."

Janet unfastened the neck of the dressing-gown, which, though lacerated by the nurse's scissors, still retained the semblance of a garment. After an interminable moment she drew out a pearl chain.

"Thank God!" said Cuckoo. "Don't raise my head; I might die if you did, and I can't die yet. Break the chain. There! Now the key slips off. Take it, go up, and burn the letters. There are a good many, but you will know them because they are tied with my hair. The lowest left-hand drawer, remember. You will burn them—there are some matches on the mantelpiece behind Arthur's photograph—and wait till they are really burnt. Will you do this, Janet?"

"I will."

"And will you promise me that, whatever happens, you will never tell any one that you have burnt anything?"

"I promise."

"You swear it?"

"I swear it."

"Let me see; you must have some reason for going, in case you are seen. If you are asked, say I sent you to see if my picture was uninjured. I am a vain woman. Anyone will believe that. Stick to that if you are questioned. And now go. Go at once. And throw away the key when you have locked up the cabinet. I shall not be able to be alone with you again, Janet. Arthur won't leave me a second time. When you come back, stand where I can see you; and if you have destroyed everything put your hand against your forehead. I shall understand. I shall not be able to thank you, but I shall thank you in my heart, and I shall die in peace. Now go, and tell Arthur to come back to me."

Janet found Monkey Brand in the ante-

chamber, his ashen, ravaged face turned with dog-like expectancy towards the billiard-room door, waiting for it to open. Without a word, he went back to his wife.

CHAPTER VI

". . . a strong man from the North,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous grey."

It was a little after twelve as Janet entered the central hall, and the salvage men were coming down for their dinner. A cord had been stretched across the foot of the grand staircase, and a policeman guarded it. As Janet hesitated, a young man and woman came boldly up to him, and demanded leave to pass.

"I can't let you up, sir," said the policeman. "It ain't safe."

"I have the right to go up to my own flat on the fourth floor," said the man. "Here is my card. You will observe my address of these Mansions is printed on it."

"Yes, my lord; certainly, my lord," said the policeman, looking at the card with respect. "The fire ain't touched anything lower than the fifth floor; but we have to keep a sharp look-out, as a many strange characters are about trying to get up, to see what they can lay hands on."

Janet had drawn up close behind the young couple, and when the cord was withdrawn went upstairs as if with them. They did not even see her. They were talking eagerly to each other. When they reached the first landing she slackened her pace, and let them go on in front.

The fire had broken out on the seventh floor of the great block of buildings, and had raged slowly downwards to the sixth and fifth. But at first, as Janet mounted the sodden staircase, there was hardly any trace of the devastation save in the wet, streaked walls, and the constant dropping of water from above.

But the fourth floor bore witness. The ceilings were scored with great cracks. The plaster had fallen in places, and everything—

walls, ceilings, doors, and passages—was blackened as if licked by great tongues of smoke.

The young couple were standing at the further end of a long empty passage, trying to open a door. As Janet looked, she saw the man put his shoulder to it. Then she turned once more to the next flight of the staircase. It was strewn with wreckage. The bent iron banisters, from which the lead hung in congealed drops, supported awkwardly the contorted remains of the banisters from above, which had crashed down upon them. The staircase had ceased to be a staircase. It was a steep, sliding mass of fallen *débris*, down which the demon of fire had hurled, as into a well, the ghastly entrails of the havoc of his torture chambers above.

Janet looked carefully at the remnants of the staircase. The heat had reached it, but not the fire. She climbed half way up it, securing a foothold where she could among the *débris*. But, halfway, the banisters from above blocked her passage, tilted

crazily towards her, insurmountable. She dared not touch them for fear of bringing them, and an avalanche of piled rubbish behind them, down upon her. She turned back a few steps, deliberately climbed, in her short country skirt, over the still standing banisters, and, holding firmly by them, went up the remainder of the flight, cautious step by step, as she and Fred had done as children, finding a foothold where she could, and not allowing her eyes to look down into the well below her. At the next landing she climbed over the banisters again, felt them for a sickening moment give under her weight, and stopped to take breath and look round her.

She was on the fifth floor.

Even here the fire had not actually been, but the heaps of sodden ashes, the gaping, burst panels, the seared doors, the blackness of the disfigured passages, the long, distraught wires of the electric lighting, showed that heat had been here; blinding, scorching, blistering heat.

The Brands' flat was on the sixth floor.

Janet looked up once more, and even her steady eyes were momentarily daunted.

The staircase was gone. A raging fire had swept up its two last flights as up a chimney, and had carried all before it. What the fire had refused it had flung down, choking up the landing below. Nothing remained of the staircase save the iron supports, sticking out of the wall like irregular, jagged teeth, and marking where each step of the stairs had been.

Higher still a zinc bath remained sticking against the charred, naked wall. The bath-room had fallen from it. The bath and its twisted pipes remained. And above all the blue sky peered down as into a pit's mouth.

Janet looked fixedly at the iron supports, and measured them with her eye. Her colour did not change, nor her breath quicken. She felt her strength in her. Then, hugging the black wall till it crumbled against her, and shading her eyes till they could see only where to tread, she went swiftly up those awful stairs, and reached the sixth floor.

Then her strength gave way, and she sank down upon something soft, and shuddered. A faint sound made her look back.

One of the supports, loosened by her footstep, stirred, and then fell. It fell a long way.

Even her marvellous inapprehensiveness was shaken. But her still courage returned to her, the quiet confidence that enabled her to break in nervous horses with which her recklessly foolhardy brother could do nothing.

Janet rose slowly to her feet, catching them as she did so in something soft. Stamped into the charred grime of the concrete floor by the feet of the firemen were the remains of a sable cloak, which, as her foot touched it, showed a shred of rose-coloured lining. A step further her foot sank into a heap of black rags, evidently hastily flung down by one in headlong flight, through the folds of which gold embroidery and a pair of jewelled clasps gleamed faintly.

Janet stood still a moment in what had been the heart of the fire. The blast of the furnace had roared down that once familiar passage, leaving a charred, rent hole, half filled up and silted out of all shape by ashes. Nevertheless her way lay down it.

She crept stumbling along it with bent head. Surely the Brands' flat was exactly here, on the left, near the head of the staircase. But she could recognise nothing.

She stopped short at a gaping cavity that had once been a doorway, and looked through it into what had once been a bedroom. The fire had swept all before it. If there had once been a floor and walls, and ceiling and furniture, all was gone, leaving a seared, egg-shaped hole. From its shelving sides three pieces of contorted iron had rolled into the central puddle—all that was left of the bed.

Could *this* be the Brands' flat?

Janet passed on, and peered through the next doorway. Here the flames had not raged so fiercely. The blackened semblance

of a room was still there, but shrunk like a mummy, and ready to crumble at a touch. It must have been a servant's bedroom. The chest of drawers, the bed, were still there in outline, but all ashes. On pegs on the wall hung ghosts of gowns and hats, as if drawn in soot. On the chest of drawers stood the effigy of a bedroom candlestick, with the extinguisher over it.

Yes, it was the Brands' flat. The outer door and little entrance hall had been wiped out, and she was inside it. This evidently had been the drawing-room. Here were signs as of some frightful conflict, as if the room had resisted its fate to the death, and had only been overpowered after a hideous struggle.

The wall-paper hung in tatters on the wall. Remnants of furniture were flung about in all directions. The door was gone. The windows were gone. The bookcase was gone, leaving no trace, but the books it had contained had been thrown all over the room in its downfall, and lay

for the most part unscorched, pell-mell, one over the other. Among the books crouched an agonised tangle of wires—all that was left of Cuckoo's grand piano. The pictures had leapt wildly from the walls to join in the conflict. A few pieces of strewed gilding, as if torn asunder with pincers, showed their fate. Horror brooded over the place as over the dead body of one who had fought for his life, and died by torture, whom the destroyer had not had time to mutilate past recognition.

Had the wind changed, and had the fiend of fire been forced to obey it, and leave his havoc unfinished? Yes, the wind must have changed, for at the next step down the passage, Janet reached Cuckoo's boudoir.

The door had fallen inward, and by some miracle the whole strength of the flames had rushed down the passage, leaving even the door unburnt. Janet walked over the door into the little room and stood amazed.

The fire had passed by on the other side. Everything here was untouched, unchanged. The yellow china cat with an immensely

long neck was still seated on its plush footstool on the hearthrug. On the sofa lay an open fashion paper, where Cuckoo had laid it down. On every table photographs of Cuckoo smiled in different attitudes. The gaudy room, with its damask panels, bore no trace of smoke, nor even of heat, save that the two palms in tubs, and the hydrangeas in the fireplace, were shrivelled up, and in the gilt bird-cage in the window was a tiny, motionless form, with outstretched wings, that would fain have flown away.

For a moment Janet forgot everything except the bullfinch—the piping bullfinch that Monkey Brand had given to his wife. She ran to the cage, brushing against the palms, which made a dry rustling as she passed, and bent over the little bird.

"Bully," she said. "Bully!" For that was the name which, after much thought, Monkey Brand had bestowed upon it.

But "Bully" did not move. He was pressed against the bars of his Chinese pagoda, with his head thrown back and his

beak open. "Bully" had known fear before he died.

Janet suddenly remembered the great fear which some one else was enduring, to whom death was coming, and she turned quickly from the window.

De Rivaz's extraordinary portrait of Cuckoo smiled at Janet from the wall, in all its shrewd, vulgar prettiness. The hard, calculating blue eyes, which could stare down the social ladder so mercilessly, were mercilessly portrayed. The careful touch of rouge on the cheek and carmine on the lip were faithfully rendered. The manicured, plebeian hands were Cuckoo's, and none but Cuckoo's. The picture was a studied insult, save in the eyes of Monkey Brand, who saw in it the reflection, imperfect and inadequate, but still the reflection of the one creature whom, in his money-getting life, he had found time to love.

Janet never could bear to look at it, and she turned her eyes away.

Directly underneath the picture stood the Italian cabinet, with its ivory figures let into

ebony. It was untouched, as Cuckoo had feared. The mermaid was still tranquilly riding a whale on the snaffle, in the midst of a sea with a crop of dolphins' tails sticking up through it.

Janet fitted the key into the lock, and then instinctively turned to shut the door. But the door lay prone upon the floor. She stole into the passage and listened.

There were voices somewhere out of sight. Human voices seemed strangely out of place in this cindered grave. They came nearer. A tall, heavily-built man came stooping round the corner, with another shorter, slighter one behind him.

"The floors are concrete; it's all right," said the first man.

Janet retreated into the room again, to wait till they had passed. But they were in no hurry. They both glanced into the room, and, seeing her, went on.

"Here you have one of the most extraordinary effects of fire," said the big man, stopping at the next doorway. "This was once a drawing-room. If you

want to paint a realistic picture, here is your subject."

"I would rather paint an angel in the pit's mouth," said the younger man significantly, leaning his delicate, artist hand against the charred doorpost. "Do you think, Vanbrunt, this is a safe place for angels without wings to be going about alone? You say the floors are safe, but are they?"

Stephen Vanbrunt considered a moment. Then he turned back to the room where Janet was. He did not enter it, but stood in the doorway, nearly filling it up—a tall, powerfully-built, unyouthful-looking man with shaggy eyebrows and a grim, clean-shaved face and heavy jaw. You may see such a face and figure any day in the Yorkshire mines or in a stone-mason's yard.

The millionaire took off his hat with a large blackened hand, and said to Janet: "I trust the salvage men have warned you that the passages on your right are unsafe?" He pointed towards the way

by which she had come. It was evidently an effort to him to speak to her. He was a shy man.

His voice was deep and gentle. It gave the same impression of strength behind it that a quiet wave does of the sea. He stood with his head thrown slightly back, an austere, massive figure, not without a certain dignity. And as he looked at Janet, there was just room in his narrow, near-sighted slits of eyes for a stern kindliness to shine through. Children and dogs always made a bee-line for Stephen.

As Janet did not answer, he said again.

"I trust you will not attempt to go down the passage to your right. It is not safe."

"No," said Janet, and she remembered her instructions. "I am only here to see if De Rivaz' picture of Mrs Brand is safe."

"Here is De Rivaz himself," said Stephen. "May we come in a moment and look at it? I am afraid I came in without asking last night, with the police inspector."

"Do come in," said Janet.

The painter came in, and glanced at the picture.

"It's all right," he said indifferently. "Not even a lick of smoke. But," he added, looking narrowly at Janet, "if Mr Brand wishes it I will send a man I can trust to revarnish it."

"Thank you," said Janet.

"Here is my card," he continued, still looking at her.

"Thank you," said Janet again, wondering when they would go.

"You are, no doubt, a relation of the Brands?" he continued desperately.

"I am a friend."

"I will come and see Mr Brand about the picture," continued the young man, stammering. "May I ask you to be so kind as to tell him so?"

"I will tell him," said Janet; and she became very pale. While this man was manufacturing conversation Cuckoo was dying—was dying, waiting with her eyes on the door. She turned instinctively to Stephen for help.

But he had forgotten her. He was looking intently at the dead bird in the cage, was touching its sleek head with a large gentle finger.

"You are well out of it, my friend," he said below his breath. "It is not good to be afraid, but it was a short agony. And it is over. You will not be afraid again. You are well out of it. No more prison bars. No more stretching of wings to fly with that may never fly. No more years of servitude for a cruel woman's whim. You are well out of it."

He looked up and met Janet's eyes.

"We are trespassers," he said instantly. "We have taken a mean advantage of your kindness in letting us come in. De Rivaz, I will show you a background for your next picture a few yards further on. Mr Brand knows me," he continued, producing a card in his turn. "We do business together. He is my tenant here. Will you kindly tell him I ventured to bring Mr De Rivaz into the remains of his flat to make a sketch of the effects of fire?"

"I will tell him," said Janet, only half attending, and laying the card beside De Rivaz'. Would they never go?

They did go immediately, Stephen peremptorily aiding the departure of the painter.

When they were in the next room De Rivaz leaned up against the blackened wall, and said hoarsely: "Vanbrunt, did you see her?"

"Of course I saw her."

"But I must paint her. I must know her. I shall go back and ask her to sit to me."

"You will do no such thing. You will immediately apply yourself to this scene of desolation, or I shall take you away. Look at this charnel-house. What unchained devils have raged in it! It is jealousy made visible. What is the use of a realistic painter like yourself, who can squeeze all romance out of life till the whole of existence is as prosaic as a string of onions; what is the use of a wretched worm like you making one

of your horrible portraits of that beautiful, innocent face?"

"I shall paint her if I live," said De Rivaz, glaring at his friend. "I know beauty when I see it."

"No, you don't. You see everything ugly, even beauty of a high order. Look at your picture of me."

Both men laughed.

"I will paint her," said De Rivaz. "Half the beauty of so-called beautiful women is loathsome to me because of the sordid or frivolous soul behind it. But I will paint a picture of that woman which will show to the world, and even to rhinoceros-hided sceptics like you, Vanbrunt, that I can make the beauty of the soul shine through even a beautiful face, as I have made mean souls shine through lovely faces. I shall fall damnably in love with her while I do it, but that can't be helped. And the picture will make her and me famous."

CHAPTER VII

"Doch wenn du sagst, 'Ich liebe dich,'
Dann muss Ich weinen bitterlich."

JANET listened to the retreating footsteps, and then flew to the cabinet.

The key would not turn, and for one sickening moment, while she wrenched clumsily at it, she feared she was not going to succeed in opening the cabinet. Janet had through life a great difficulty in all that involved delicate manipulation, except a horse's mouth. If a lock resisted, she used force, generally shooting it; if the hinge of a door gave, she jammed it. But in this instance, contrary to her usual experience, the lock did turn at last, and the whole front of the cabinet, dolphins and mermaid and all, came suddenly forwards towards her, disclosing within a double tier of ebony drawers, all exquisitely inlaid with ivory, and each having its tiny, silver-scrolled lock.

Some water had dripped on to the cabinet from a damp place in the ceiling, and a few drops had penetrated down to the inner drawers, rusting the silver of the lowest drawer—the left-hand one.

Janet fitted the key into it. It turned easily, but the drawer resisted. It came out a little way, and then stuck. It was quite full. Janet gave another pull, and the narrow, shallow drawer came out, with difficulty—but still, it did come out.

On the top, methodically folded, were some hand-written directions for fancy work. Cuckoo never did any needlework. Janet raised them, and looked underneath. Where was the packet tied with hair? It was nowhere to be seen. There were a quantity of letters loosely laid together. Could these be they? Evidently they had not been touched for a long time, for the grime of London air and fog had settled on them. Janet wiped the topmost with her handkerchief, and a few words came clearly out: "My darling. My treasure." Her handkerchief had touched something

loose in the corner of the drawer. Could this dim, moth-fretten lock have once been Cuckoo's yellow hair? Even as she looked, out of it came a moth, dragging itself slowly over the face of the letter, opening its unused wings. It crawled up over the rusted silver scroll-work, and flew away into the room.

Yes. These must be the letters. They had been tied once, and the moth had eaten away the tie. She took them carefully up. There were a great many. She gathered them all together, as she thought; looked again at the back of the drawer to make sure, and found a few more, with a little gilt heart rusted into them. Then she replaced the needlework directions, pushed to the drawer—which resisted again, and then went back into its place—locked it, extracted the key, locked the cabinet, and threw the key out of a broken pane of the window. She saw it light on the roof lower down, and slide into the safe keeping of the gutter.

Then she moved away the shrivelled hydrangeas which stood in the fire-place, and put the letters into the empty grate. Once more she went to the door and listened. All was quite still. She came back. On the chimney-piece stood a photograph of Monkey Brand grinning smugly through its cracked glass. Behind it was a silver match-box with a pig on it, and "Scratch me" written on it. Cuckoo affected everything she called "quaint."

Janet struck a match, knelt down, and held it to the pile of letters.

But love-letters never yet burned easily. Perhaps they have passed through the flame of life, and after that no feebler fire can reach them quickly. The fire shrank from them, and match after match went out, flame after flame wavered, and refused to meddle with them.

After wasting time in several exactly similar attempts when one failure would have been sufficient, Janet opened and crumpled some of them to let the air get to them. The handwriting was strangely familiar.

She observed the fact without reasoning on it. Then she sprinkled the remainder of the letters on the top of the crumpled ones, and again set the pile alight.

The fire got hold now. It burned up fiercely, bringing down upon itself the upper letters, which toppled into the heart of the miniature conflagration much as the staircase must have toppled on to the stairs below, in the bigger conflagration of yesterday. How familiar the handwriting was! How some of the sentences shone out as if written in fire on black sheets: "Love like ours can never fade." The words faded out at once, as the dying letters gave up the ghost—the ghost of dead love. Janet gazed fascinated. Another letter fell in, opening as it fell, disclosing a photograph. Fred's face looked full at Janet for a moment out of the little greedy flames that licked it up. Janet drew back trembling, suddenly sick unto death.

Fred's face! Fred's writing!

She trembled so violently that she did not notice that the smoke was no longer going up the chimney, but was filling the room.

The chimney was evidently blocked higher up.

She was so paralysed that she did not notice a light footfall in the passage, and a figure in the doorway. Janet was not of those who see behind their backs. The painter, alarmed by the smoke, stood for a moment, brush in hand, looking fixedly at her. Then his eye fell on the smoking papers in the grate, and he withdrew noiselessly.

It was out now. The second fire was out. What violent passions had been consumed in it! That tiny fire in the grate seemed to Janet more black with horror than the appalling scene of havoc in the next room. She knelt down and parted the hot films of the little bonfire. There was no scrap of paper left. The thing was done.

Then she noticed the smoke, and her heart stood still.

She pushed the cinders into the back of the grate with her hands, replaced the hydrangeas in the fire-place, and ran to the window. But the wood-work was warped

by the heat. It would not open. She wasted time trying to force it, and then broke the glass and let in the air. But the air only blew the smoke out into the passage. It was like a bad dream. She seized the prostrate door, and tried to raise it. But it was too heavy for her.

She stood up panting, watching the tell-tale smoke curl lightly through the doorway.

More steps in the passage.

She went swiftly into the next room, and stood in the doorway. The lift man came cautiously down the passage, accompanied by an alert, spectacled young man, notebook in hand. The lift man bore the embarrassed expression of one whose sense of duty has succumbed before too large a tip. The young man had the decided manner of one who intends to have his money's worth.

"Where are we now?" he said, scribbling for dear life, his spectacles turning all ways at once. "I don't like this smoke. Can the beastly place be on fire still?"

But the lift man had caught sight of Janet, and the sight of her was obviously unwelcome.

"The floors ain't safe here," he said confusedly. "There's a deal more damage to be seen in the left wing."

"Is there?" said the young man drily. "We'll go there next"; and he went on peering and scribbling.

A voice in the distance shouted imperiously, "Number Two, where does this smoke come from?"

There was a plodding of heavy, hastening feet above.

In an instant the young man and the lift man had disappeared round the corner.

Janet ran swiftly down the black passage along which they had come, almost brushing against the painter in her haste, without perceiving him. She flew on, recognising by instinct the once familiar way to the central hall on each landing. Here it was at last. She paused a moment by the gaping lift, and then walked slowly to the head of the iron outer staircase.

A policeman was speaking austerely to a short, stout, shabbily-dressed woman of determined aspect, who bore the unmistakable stamp of those whose unquenchable desire it is to be where their presence is not desired, where it is even deprecated.

"Only ladies and gents with passes is admitted," the policeman was saying.

"But how can I get a pass?"

"I don't precisely know," said the policeman cautiously, "but I know it must be signed by Mr Vanbrunt or Mr Brown."

"I am the Duchess of Quorn, and I am an intimate friend of Mr Vanbrunt."

Janet passed the couple with a beating heart. But apparently there were no restrictions about persons going out, only about those trying to get in. The policeman made way for her at once, and she went down unchallenged.

. . . . . .

In the billiard-room time was waxing short; was obviously running out.

The child had arrived from the country

with his nurse. Monkey Brand took him in his arms at the door, and knelt down with him beside Cuckoo.

"Arty has come to say 'good-morning' to Mammy," he said, in a strangled, would-be cheerful voice.

Cuckoo looked at the child wildly for a moment, as the little laughing face came within the radius of her fading sight. She suffered the cool, flower-like cheek to touch hers, but then she whispered to her husband, "Take him away. I want only you."

He took Arty back to his nurse, holding him closely to him, and returned to her.

Death seemed to have advanced a step nearer with the advent of the child.

They both waited for it in silence.

"Don't kneel, Arthur," said Cuckoo at last. "You will be so tired."

He obediently drew up a little stool, and crouched hunched up upon it, her cold hand between his cold hands.

"Is there any one at the door?" she asked, after an age of silence.

"No one, dearest; we are quite alone."

"I should like to see Janet to say 'good-bye.'"

"Must I go and look for her?"

"No. I sent her to see if my picture was really safe. It is all you will have to remember me by. She will come and tell me directly."

"I do not want any picture of you, Cuckoo."

Another silence.

"I can't wait much longer," said Cuckoo below her breath; but he heard it. "Are you sure there is no one at the door, Arthur?"

"No one."

Silence again.

"Ask God to have pity on me," said Cuckoo faintly. "Isn't there some one coming in now?"

"No one."

"Ask God to have pity on us both," said Cuckoo again. "Pray so that I can hear."

But apparently Monkey Brand could not pray aloud.

"Say something to make the time pass," she whispered.

"The Lord is my Shepherd," said Monkey Brand brokenly, his mind throwing back thirty years; "I shall not want. He leadeth me beside the still waters. He ——"

"I seem to hear steps," interrupted Cuckoo.

"He leadeth me beside the still waters. Yea, though I walk"—the voice broke down—"though I walk in the valley of the shadow of ——"

"Some one is coming in now," said Cuckoo, in a faint, acute voice.

"It is Janet."

"I can't see her plainly. Tell her to come nearer."

He beckoned to Janet.

"I can see her now," said Cuckoo, the blindness of death in her wide eyes, which stared vacantly where Janet was not; "at least, I see some one. Isn't she holding her hand to her forehead?"

"Yes."

The last tears Cuckoo was destined to shed stood in her blind eyes.

"Good-bye, dear Janet," she gasped.

"Good-bye, Cuckoo."

"Send her away. Is she quite gone, Arthur?"

"Yes, dearest."

"I must go too. I don't know how to leave you, but I must. I cannot see you, but you are with me in the darkness. Take me in your arms and let me die in them. Is that your cheek against mine? How cold it is! Hold your dear hands to my face that I may kiss them too. They have been kind, kind hands to me. How my poor Arthur trembles! You were too good for me, Arthur. You have been the only real friend I've ever had in the world. More than father and mother to me. More than any one."

"You did love me, little one?"

"Yes."

"Only me?"

"Only you."

He burst into a passion of tears.

"Forgive me for having doubted you," he said hoarsely.

"Did you ever doubt me?"

"Yes, once. I ought to have known better. I can't forgive myself. Forgive me, my wife."

Cuckoo was silent. Death was hard upon her, heavy on voice and breath.

"Say, 'Arthur, I forgive you,'" whispered her husband through the darkness.

"Arthur, I forgive you," said Cuckoo with a sob. And her head fell forward on his breast.

CHAPTER VIII

"But it was even thou, my companion, my guide, and mine own familiar friend."

It was not until Janet was sitting alone in the room she had taken at an hotel that her dazed mind began to recover itself. It did not recoil in horror from the remembrance of that grim ascent to the flat. It did not dwell on Cuckoo's death.

Janet said over and over again to her-

self, in tearless anguish, "Cuckoo and Fred! Cuckoo and Fred!"

The shock had succeeded to a great strain, and she succumbed to it.

She sat on her box in the middle of the room hour after hour in the stifling heat. The afternoon sun beat in on her, but she did not pull down the blind. There was an armchair in the corner, but Janet unconsciously clung to the box, as the only familiar object in an unfamiliar world. Late in the afternoon, when Anne found her, Janet was still sitting on it, gazing in front of her, with an untasted cup of tea beside her, which the chambermaid had brought her.

Anne sat down on the box and put her arms round her.

"My dear," she said; "my dear."

And Janet said no word, but hid her convulsed face on Anne's shoulder.

Janet had a somewhat confused remembrance of what happened after that. Anne ordered, and she obeyed, and there was another journey in a cab, and presently

she was sitting in a cool, white bedroom leading out of Anne's room; at least Anne said it did. Anne came in and out now and then, and forced her to drink a cup of milk, and smoothed her hair with a very tender hand. But Janet made no response.

Anne was of those who do not despise the little things of life. She saw that Janet was suffering from a great shock, and she sent for the only child there was in the great, dreary London house—the vulgar kitchen kitten belonging to the cook.

Anne silently held the warm, sleepy kitten against Janet's cheek. It purred when it was touched, and then fell asleep, a little ball of comfort against Janet's neck. The white, over-strained face relaxed. Anne's gentle touch and presence had not achieved that, but the kitten did. Two large tears rolled down into its fur.

The peace and comfort and physical well-being of feeling a little life warm—asleep, pressed close against you, is perhaps not

new. Perhaps it goes back as far as the wilderness, which ceased to be a wilderness when Eve brought forth her first-born in it. I think she must have forgotten all about her lost Garden of Eden when she first heard the breathing of her sleeping child against her bosom. The brambles and the thorns would prick very little after that.

Later on, when Anne came in softly, Janet was asleep, with the kitten on her shoulder.

An hour later Anne came in once more in a wonderful white gown, and stood a moment watching Janet. Anne was not excited, but a little tumult was shaking her, as a summer wind stirs and ripples all the surface of a deep-set pool. She knew that she would meet Stephen to-night at the dinner-party for which she was already late, and that knowledge, though long experience had taught her that it was useless to meet him, that he would certainly not speak to her if he could help it, still the knowledge that she should see

him caused a faint colour to burn in her pale cheek, a wavering light in her grave eyes, a slight tremor of her whole delicate being. She looked, as she stood in the half-light, a woman to whose exquisite hands even a poet might have entrusted his difficult, double-edged love, much more a hard man of business such as Stephen.

Janet's face, which had been so wan, was flushed a deep red. She stirred uneasily, and began speaking hoarsely and incoherently.

"All burnt," she said, over and over again. "All burnt. Nothing left."

Anne laid down the fan she held in her hand, and drew a step nearer.

Janet suddenly sat up, opened her eyes to a horrible width, and stared at her.

"I have burnt them all, Fred," she said, looking full at Anne. "Everything. There is nothing left. I promised I would, and I have. But oh! Fred, how could you do it? How could you, could you, do it?" And she burst into a low cry of anguish.

Anne took her by the arm.

"You are dreaming, Janet," she said. "Wake up. Look! You are here with me, Anne—your friend."

Janet winced, and her eyelids quivered. Then she looked round her bewildered, and said in a more natural voice: "I don't know where I am. I thought I was at home with Fred."

"I have sent for your brother, and he will come and take you home to-morrow."

"Something dreadful has happened," said Janet. "It is like a stone on my head. It crushes me, but I don't know what it is."

Anne looked gravely at Janet, and half unconsciously unclasped the thin chain, with its heavy diamond pendant, from her neck. Her hand trembled as she did it. She was not thinking of Janet at that moment. "I shall not see him to-night," she was saying to herself. And the delicate colour faded, the hidden tumult died down. She was calm and practical once more. She wrote a note, sent it down to the waiting carriage to deliver, got quickly out of the flowing

white gown into a dressing-gown, and returned to Janet.

. . . . . .

Fred came to London the following day. Even his mercurial nature was distressed at Cuckoo's sudden death, and at Janet's wan, fixed face. But he felt that if his sister must be ill, she could not be better placed than in that ducal household. A good many persons among Fred's acquaintances heard of Janet's illness during the next few days, and of the kindness of the Duke and Duchess of Quorn.

The Duke and Duchess really were kind. The benevolence of so down-trodden and helpless a creature as the Duke—who was of no importance except in affairs of the realm, where he was a power—his kindness, of course, was of no account. But the Duchess rose to the occasion. She was one of those small, square, kind-hearted, determined women, with a long upper lip, whose faces are set on looking upwards, who can make life vulgarly happy for struggling, middle-class men, if they are poor enough

to give their wives scope for an unceasing energy on their behalf. She was a *femme incomprise*, misplaced. By birth she was the equal of her gentle-mannered husband, but she was one of Nature's vulgarians all the same, and directly the thin gilt of a certain youthful prettiness wore off—she had been a plump, bustling little partridge at twenty—her innate commonness came obviously to the surface; in fact, it became the surface.

> "Age could not wither her, nor custom stale
> Her infinite vulgarity."

There was no need for her to push, but she pushed. She made embarrassing jokes at the expense of her children. In society she was familiar where she should have been courteous, openly curious where she should have ignored, gratuitously confidential where she should have been reticent. She never realized the impression she made on others. She pursued her discomfortable objects of pursuit, namely, eligible young men and endless charities, with the same total disregard of appearances, the same ungainly

agility, which an elderly hen will sometimes suddenly evince in chase of a butterfly.

Some one had nicknamed her "the steam roller," and the name stuck to her.

She was — perhaps not unnaturally — annoyed when Anne brought a stranger back to the house with her in the height of the season, and installed her in one of the spare rooms, while she herself was absent, talking loudly at a little musical tea-party. But when she saw Janet next day sitting in one of Anne's dressing-gowns in Anne's sitting-room, she instantly took a fancy to her; one of those heavy, prodding fancies which immediately investigate by questions — the Duchess never hesitated to ask questions—all the past life of the victim, as regards illnesses, illnesses of relations, especially if obscure and internal, cause of death of parents, present financial circumstances, etc. Janet, whose strong constitution rapidly rallied from the shock that had momentarily prostrated her, thought these subjects of conversation natural and even exhilarating. She was accustomed to them

in her own society. The first time the Smiths had called on her at Ivy Cottage, had they not enquired the exact area of her little drawing-room? She found the society of the Duchess vaguely delightful and sympathetic, a welcome relief from her own miserable thoughts. And the Duchess told Janet in return about a very painful ailment from which the Duke suffered, and which it distressed him "to hear alluded to," and all about Anne's millionaire. When, a few days later, Janet was able to travel, the Duchess parted from her with real regret, and begged her to come and stay with them again after her marriage.

Anne seemed to have receded from Janet during these last days. Perhaps the Duchess had elbowed her out. Perhaps Anne divined that Janet had been told all about her unfortunate love affair. Anne's patient dignity had a certain remoteness in it. Her mother, whose hitherto thinly-draped designs on Stephen were now clothed only in the recklessness of despair, made Anne's life well-nigh un-

endurable to her at this time, a constant mortification of her refinement and her pride. She withdrew into herself. And perhaps also Anne was embarrassed by the knowledge that she had inadvertently become aware, when Janet's mind had wandered, of something connected with the burning of papers which Janet was concealing, and which, as Anne could see, was distressing her more even than the sudden death of Mrs Brand.

Fred took charge of his sister in an effusive manner when she was well enough to travel. She was very silent all the way home. She had become shy with her brother, depressed in his society. She had always known that evil existed in the world, but she had somehow managed to combine that knowledge with the comfortable conviction that the few people she cared for were "different." She observed nothing except what happened under her actual eyes, and then only if her eyes were forcibly turned in that direction.

She knew Fred drank only because she had seen him drunk. The shaking hand, and broken nerve, and weakly-violent temper, the signs of intemperance when he was sober, were lost upon her. She dismissed them with the reflection that Fred was like that. Cause and effect did not exist for Janet. And those for whom they do not exist sustain heavy shocks.

Cuckoo her friend, and Fred her brother!

The horror of that remembrance never left her during these days. She could not think about it. She could only silently endure it.

Poor Janet did not realize even now that the sole reason why Cuckoo had made friends with her was in order to veil the intimacy with her brother. The hard, would-be smart woman would not, without some strong reason, have made much of so unfashionable an individual as Janet in the first instance, though there was no doubt that in the end Cuckoo had grown fond of Janet for her

own sake. And her genuine liking for the sister had survived the rupture with the brother.

The dog-cart was waiting for Fred and Janet at Mudbury, and, as they drove in the dusk through the tranquil country lanes, Janet drew a long breath.

"You must not take on about Mrs Brand's death too much," said Fred at last, who had also been restlessly silent for the greater part of the journey.

Janet did not answer.

"We must all die some day," continued Fred. "It's the common lot. I did not like Mrs Brand as much as you did, Janet. She was not my sort—but still—when I heard the news——"

"I loved her," said Janet hoarsely. "I would have done anything for her."

"You must cheer up," said Fred, "and try and look at the bright side. That was what the Duke was saying only yesterday when I called to thank him. He was in such a hurry that he hardly had a moment to spare, but I took a

great fancy to him. No airs and soft sawder, and a perfect gentleman. I shall call again when next I am in London. I shan't forget their kindness to you."

Again no answer.

"It is your duty to cheer up," continued Fred. "George is coming over to see you to-morrow morning."

"I think, don't you think, Fred," said Janet suddenly, "that George is good—really good, I mean?"

"He is all right," said Fred. "Not exactly open-handed. You must lay your account for that, Janet. You'll find him a bit of a screw, or I'm much mistaken."

Janet was too dazed to realize what Fred's discovery of George's meanness betokened.

Silence again.

They were nearing home. The lights of Ivy Cottage twinkled through the violet dusk. Janet looked at them without seeing them.

Cuckoo her friend, and Fred her brother!

"I suppose, Janet," said Fred suddenly, "you were not able to ask Mrs Brand—no—of course not——But perhaps you were able to put in a word for me to Brand about that—about waiting for his money?"

"I never said anything to either of them," said Janet. "I never thought of it again. I forgot all about it."

CHAPTER IX

"Yea, each with the other will lose and win,
Till the very Sides of the Grave fall in."
—W. E. Henley.

It was a summer night, hot and still, six weeks later, towards the end of July. Through the open windows of a house in Hamilton Gardens a divine voice came out into the listening night:—

"She comes not when Noon is on the roses—
Too bright is day.
She comes not to the Soul till it reposes
From work and play.

"But when Night is on the hills, and the great Voices
Roll in from Sea,
By starlight and by candlelight and dreamlight
She comes to me."

Stephen sat alone in Hamilton Gardens, a massive figure under a Chinese lantern, which threw an unbecoming light on his grim face and heavy brows, and laid on the grass a grotesque boulder of shadow of the great capitalist.

I do not know what he was thinking about, as he sat listening to the song, biting what could only by courtesy be entitled his little finger. Was he undergoing a passing twinge of poetry? Did money occupy his thoughts?

His impassive face betrayed nothing. When did it ever betray anything?

He was not left long alone. Figures were pacing in the half-lit gardens, two and two.

Prose rushed in upon him in the shape of a small square body, upholstered in grey satin, which trundled its way resolutely towards him.

The Duchess feared neither God nor man, but if fear had been possible to her, it would have been for that dignified, yet elusive, personage, whom she panted to call her son-in-law.

She sat down by him with anxiety and determination in her eyes.

"By starlight, and by candlelight, and dreamlight she comes to me," said Stephen to himself, with a sardonic smile. "Also by daylight, and when noon is on the roses, and when I am at work and at play. In short, she always comes."

"What a perfect night!" said the Duchess.

"Perfect."

"And that song—how beautiful!"

"Beautiful."

"I did not know you cared for poetry?"

"I don't."

Stephen added to other remarkable qualities that of an able and self-possessed liar. In business he was considered straight even by gentlemen, foolishly strait-laced by men of business. But to certain persons, and the Duchess was one of them, he never spoke

the truth. He was wont to say that any lies he told he did not intend to account for, in this world or the next; and that the bill, if there was one, would never be sent in to him. He certainly had the courage of his convictions.

"I want you to think twice of the disappointment you have given us all by not coming to us in Scotland this autumn. The Duke was really quite put out. He had so reckoned on your coming."

Stephen did not answer. He had a colossal power of silence when it suited him. He had liked the Duke for several years before he had made the acquaintance of his family. The two men had met frequently on business, understood each other, and had almost reached friendship when the Duchess intervened, to ply her "savage trade." Since then a shade of distant politeness had tinged the Duke's manner towards Stephen, and the self-made man, sensitive to anything that resembled a sense of difference of class, instinctively drew away from him. Yet, if Stephen had but

known it, the change in the Duke's manner was only owing to the unformulated suspicion that the father sometimes feels for the man, however eligible, whom he suspects of filching from him his favourite daughter.

"We are *all* disappointed," continued the Duchess, and her power of hitting on the raw did not fail her, for her victim winced—not perceptibly. She went on: "Do think of it again, Mr Vanbrunt. If you could see Larinnen in autumn—the autumn tints, you know—and no party. Just ourselves. And I am sure from your face you are a lover of Nature."

"I hate Nature," said Stephen. "It bores me. I am very easily bored."

He was longing to get away from London, to steep his soul in the sympathy of certain solitary woodland places he knew of, shy as himself; where perhaps the strain on his aching spirit might relax somewhat, where he could lie in the shade for hours, and listen to running water, and forget that he was a plain, middle-aged millionaire,

whom a brilliant, exquisite creature could not love for himself.

"When I said no party I did not mean quite alone," said the Duchess, breathing heavily, for a frontal attack is generally also an uphill one. "A few cheerful friends. How right you are! One does not see enough of one's real friends. Anne often says that. She said to me only yesterday, when we were talking of you——"

The two liars were interrupted by the advance towards them of Anne and De Rivaz. They came silently across the shadowy grass, into the little ring of light thrown by the Chinese lantern.

De Rivaz was evidently excited. His worn, cynical face looked boyish in the garish light.

"Duchess," he said, "I have only just heard by chance from Lady Anne, that the unknown divinity whom I am turning heaven and earth to find, in order that I may paint her, has actually been staying under your roof, and that you intend to ask her again."

"Mr De Rivaz means Janet Black," said Anne to her mother.

"I implore you to ask me to meet her," said the painter.

"But she is just going to be married," said the Duchess, with genuine regret. Here was an opportunity lost.

"I know it; it breaks my heart to know it," said De Rivaz. "But married or not, maid, wife, or widow, I must paint her. Give me the chance of making her acquaintance."

"I will do what I can," said the Duchess, gently tilting forward her square person on to its flat white satin feet, and looking with calculating approval at her daughter. Surely Anne had never looked so lovely as at this obviously propitious moment.

"Take a turn with me, young man," continued the Duchess, "and I will see what I can do. And Anne," she said with a backward glance at her daughter, "try and persuade Mr Vanbrunt to come to us in September."

"I will do my best," said Anne, and she sat down on the bench.

Stephen, who had risen when she joined them, looked at her with shy, angry admiration.

It was a new departure for Anne so openly to abet her mother, and it wounded him.

"Won't you sit down again?" said Anne, meeting his eyes firmly. "I wish to speak to you."

He sat down awkwardly. He was always awkward in her presence. Perhaps it was only a moment, but it seemed to him an hour while she kept silence.

The same voice sang across the starlit dark:

> "Some souls have quickened, eye to eye,
> And heart to heart, and hand in hand;
> The swift fire leaps, and instantly
> They understand."

Neither heard it. Nearer than the song, close between them some mighty enfolding presence seemed to have withdrawn them into itself. There is a moment

when Love leaves the two hearts in which He dwells, and stands between them revealed.

So far it has been man and woman and Love—three persons met painfully together, who cannot walk together, not being agreed. But the hour comes when in awe the man and woman perceive, what was always so from the beginning, that they twain are but one being, one foolish creature who, in a great blindness, thought it was two, mistook itself for two.

Perhaps that moment of discovery of our real identity in another is the first lowest rung of the steep ladder of love. Does God, who flung down to us that nearest empty highway to Himself, does He wonder why so few travellers come up by it; why we go wearily round by such bitter sin-bogged, sorrow-smirched by-paths, to reach Him at last?

There may be much love without that sense of oneness, but when it comes it can only come to two, it can only be born of a mutual love. Neither can feel

it without the other. Anne knew that. By her love for him she knew he loved her. He was slower, more obtuse; yet even he, with his limited perceptions and calculating mind, even he nearly believed, nearly had faith, nearly asked her if she could love him.

But the old self came to his perdition, the strong, shrewd, iron-willed self that had made him what he was, that had taught him to trust few, to follow his own judgment, that in his strenuous life had furnished him with certain dogged conventional ready-made convictions regarding women. Men he could judge, and did judge. He knew who would cheat him, who would fail him at a pinch, whom he could rely on. But of women he knew little. He regarded them as apart from himself, and did not judge them individually, but collectively. He knew how one of Anne's sisters, possibly more than one of them, had been coerced into marriage. He did not see that Anne belonged to a different class of being.

His shrewdness, his bitter knowledge of the seamy side of a society to which he did not naturally belong, its uncouth passion for money, blinded him.

He had become very pale while he sat by her, while poor Anne vainly racked her brain to remember what it was she wished to say to him. The overwhelming impulse to speak, to have it out with her, the thirst for her love was upon him. When was it not upon him? He looked at her fixedly, and his heart sank. How could she love him—she in her wand-like delicacy and ethereal beauty? She was not of his world, she was not made of the same clay. No star seemed so remote as this still dark-eyed woman beside him. How could she love him? No, the thing was impossible.

A very ugly emotion laid violent momentary hold on him. Let him take her whether she cared for him or not. If money could buy her, let him buy her.

He glanced sidelong at her, and then moved nearer to her. She turned her

head, and looked full at him. She had no fear of him. The fierce, harsh face did not daunt her. She understood him, his stubborn humility, his blind love, this momentary hideous lapse, and knew that it was momentary.

"Lady Anne," he said hoarsely, "will you marry me?"

It had come at last, the word her heart had ached for so long. She did not think. She did not hesitate. She, who had so often been troubled by the mere sight of him across a room, was calm now. She looked at him with a certain gentle scorn.

"No, thank you," she said.

"I love you," he said, taking her hand. "I have long loved you."

It was his hand that trembled. Hers was steady as she withdrew it.

"I know," she said.

"Then could not you think of me? I implore you to marry me."

"You are speaking on impulse. We have hardly exchanged a word with each other for the last three months. You

had no intention of asking me to marry you when you came here this evening."

"I don't care what intentions I may or may not have had," said Stephen, his temper, always quick, rising at her self-possession. "I mean what I say now, and I have meant it ever since I first saw you."

"Do you think I love you?"

"I love you enough for both," he said with passion. "You are in my heart and my brain, and I can't tear you out. I can't live without you."

"In old days, when you were not quite so rich, and not quite so worldly-wise, did you not sometimes hope to marry for love?"

"I hope to marry for love now. Do you doubt that I love you?"

"No, I don't. But have you never hoped to marry a woman who would care for you as much as you did for her?"

"I can't expect that," said the millionaire. "I don't expect it. I'm not—I'm not the kind of man whom women easily love."

"No," said Anne, "you're not."

"But when I care, I care with my whole heart. Will you think this over, and give me an answer to-morrow?"

"I have already answered you."

"I beg you to reconsider it."

"Why should I reconsider it?"

"I would try to make you happy. Let me prove my devotion to you."

She looked long at him, and she saw, without the possibility of deceiving herself, that if she told him she loved him he would not believe it. It was the conventional answer when a millionaire offers marriage, and he had a rooted belief in the conventional. After marriage it would be the same. He would think duty prompted it, her kiss, her caress. Oh! suffocating thought. She would be farther from him than ever as his wife.

"I think we should get on together," he faltered, her refusal reaching him gradually, like a cold tide rising round him. "I had ventured to hope that you did not dislike me."

"I do not dislike you," said Anne

deliberately. "You are quite right. The thing I dislike is a mercenary marriage."

He became ashen white. He rose slowly to his feet, and drawing near to her looked steadily at her, lightning in his eyes.

"Do I deserve that insult?" he said, his voice hardly human in its suppressed rage.

He looked formidable in the uncertain light.

She confronted him unflinching.

"Yes," she said, "you do. You calmly offer me marriage while you are firmly convinced that I don't care for you, and you are surprised—you actually dare to be surprised—when I refuse you. Those who offer insults must accept them."

"I intended none, as you well know," he said, drawing back a step. He felt his strength in him, but this slight woman, whom he could break with one hand, was stronger than he.

"Why should I marry you if I don't love you?" she went on. "Why, of course

because you are Mr Vanbrunt, the greatest millionaire in England. Your choice has fallen on me. Let me accept with gratitude my brilliant fate, and if I don't actually dislike you, so much the better for both of us."

Stephen continued to look hard at her, but he said nothing. Her beauty astonished him.

"And what do we both lose," said Anne, "in such a marriage—you as well as I? Is it not the *one* chance, the one hope of a mutual love? Is it so small a thing in your eyes that you can cast the possibility from you of a love that will meet yours and not endure it, the possibility of a woman somewhere, who might be found for diligent seeking, who might walk into your life without seeking, who would love you as much as"—Anne's voice shook—"perhaps even more than you love her;—to whom you—you yourself—stern and grim as you seem to many—might be the whole world? Have you always been so busy making this dreadful money, which buys so much, that you have

forgotten the things that money can't buy? No; no. Do not let us lock each other out from the only thing worth having in this hard world. We should be companions in misfortune."

She held out her hands to him with a sudden beautiful gesture, and smiled at him through her tears.

He took her hands in his large grasp, and in his small quick eyes there were tears too.

"We have both something to forgive each other," she said, trembling like a reed. "I have spoken harshly, and you unwisely. But the day will come when you will be grateful to me that I did not shut you out from the only love that could make you, of all men, really happy—the love that is returned."

He kissed each hand gently, and released them. He could not speak.

She went swiftly from him through the trees.

"May God bless her," said Stephen. "May God in heaven bless her."

CHAPTER X

"Thine were the weak, slight hands
That might have taken this strong soul, and bent
Its stubborn substance to thy soft intent."
—WILLIAM WATSON.

IT was hard on Stephen that when he walked into a certain drawing-room the following evening he should find Anne there. It was doubly hard that he should have to take her in to dinner. Yet so it was. There ought to have been a decent interval before their next meeting. Some one had arranged tactlessly, without any sense of proportion. Though he had not slept since she left him in the garden, still it seemed only a moment ago, and that she was back beside him in an instant, without giving him time to draw breath.

She met him as she always met him, with the faint enigmatical smile, with the touch of gentle respect never absent from her manner to him, except for one moment last night. He needed it. He had fallen in

his own estimation during that sleepless night. He saw the sudden impulse that had goaded him into an offer of marriage—the kind of offer that how many men make in good faith—in its native brutality—as he knew she had seen it. When he first perceived her in the dimly-lighted room, and he was aware of her presence before he saw her, he felt he could not go towards her, as a man may feel that he cannot go home. Home for Stephen was wherever Anne was, even if the door were barred against him.

But after a few minutes he screwed his "courage to the sticking-place," and went up to her.

"I am to take you in to dinner," he said. "It is your misfortune, but not my fault."

"I am glad," she said. "I came to you last night because I had something urgent to say to you. I shall have an opportunity of saying it now."

The constraint and awkwardness he had of late felt in her presence fell from him. It seemed as if they had gone back by some welcome short cut to the simple intercourse

of the halcyon days when they had first met.

He cursed himself for his mole-like obtuseness in having thought last night that she was playing into her mother's hands. When had she ever done so? Why had he suspected her?

In the meanwhile the world was

> "At rest with will
> And leisure to be fair."

The Duchess was not there, suddenly and mercifully laid low by that occasional friend of society—influenza. The Duke, gay and *débonnaire* in her absence, was beaming on his hostess whom he was to take into dinner, and to whom he was sentimentally linked by a mild flirtation in a past decade, a flirtation so mild that it had no real existence, except in the imaginative remembrance of both.

Presently Anne and Stephen were walking in to dinner together. It was a large party, and they sat together at the end of the table.

Anne did not wait this time. She began to talk at once.

"I am anxious about a friend of mine," she said, "who is, I am afraid, becoming entangled in a far greater difficulty than she is aware. But it is a long story. Do you mind long stories?"

"No."

Stephen turned towards her, becoming a solid block of attention.

"My friend is a Miss Black, a very beautiful woman, whom Mr De Rivaz is dying to paint. You may recollect having seen her where he saw her first, the day after the fire in Lowndes Mansions, in the burnt-out flat of that unfortunate Mrs Brand."

"I saw her. I remember her perfectly. I spoke to her about the dangerous state of the passages. I thought her the most beautiful creature, bar none, I had ever seen."

Stephen pulled himself up. He knew it was most impolitic to praise one woman to another. They did not like it. It was

against the code. He must be more careful, or he should offend her again.

Anne looked at him very pleasantly. Her eyes were good to meet. She was evidently not offended. Dear me! Mysterious creatures, women! It struck him, not for the first time, that Anne was an exception to the whole of her sex.

"Isn't she beautiful!" said the exception warmly. "But I am afraid she is not quite as wise as she is beautiful. She is in a great difficulty."

"What about?"

"It seems she burned something when she was alone in the flat. At least she is accused by Mr Brand of burning something. A very valuable paper—an I O U for a large sum which her brother owed Mr Brand, and which became due a month ago—is missing."

"She did burn something," said Stephen. "I was on the floor above at the time, and smelt smoke, and came down, and De Rivaz told me it was nothing; only the divinity burning some papers. He was alarmed, and

left his sketch to find where the smoke came from. He saw her burn them."

"He said that to you," said Anne, "but to no one else. I talked over the matter with him last night, and directly he heard Miss Black was in trouble, he assured me that he had thoughtlessly burnt a sheet of drawing-paper himself. That was what caused the smoke. And he said he would tell Mr Brand so."

"H'm! Brand is not made up of credulity."

"No. He seems convinced Miss Black destroyed that paper."

"And does she deny it?"

"Of course."

"She can't deny that she burned something."

"Yes, she does. She sticks to it that she burned nothing."

"Then she must be a fool, because three of us know she did. De Rivaz knows it, I know it, and I see you know it."

"And it turns out the lift man knows it; at least he was reprimanded for being on

the upper floors without leave, and he said he only went there because there was a smoke, and he was anxious; and the smoke came from the Brands' sitting-room, which Miss Black left as he came up. He told Mr Brand this, who put what he thought was two and two together. Fred Black, it seems, would have been ruined if Mr Brand had enforced payment, and he believes Miss Black got hold of the paper at her brother's instigation and destroyed it."

"Well! I suppose she did," said Stephen.

"If you knew her you would know that that is impossible."

Stephen looked incredulous.

"I've known a good many unlikely things happen about money," he said slowly. "I daresay she did it to save her brother."

"She did not do it," said Anne.

"If she didn't, why doesn't she say what she did burn, and why? What's the use of sticking to it that she burned nothing when Brand knows that's a lie? A lie is a deadly stupid thing unless it's uncommonly well done."

"She has had very little practice in lying. I fancy this is her first."

"The only possible course left for her to take is to admit that she burned something, and to say what it was. Why doesn't she see that?"

"Because she is a stupid woman, and she does not see the consequences of her insane denial, and the conclusions that must inevitably be drawn from it. When the room was examined, ashes were found in the grate that had been paper."

"How does she explain that?"

"She does not explain it. She explains nothing. She just sets her teeth and repeats her wretched formula that she burned nothing."

"What took her up to the flat at all then, just when her friend was dying?"

"She says Mrs Brand sent her up to see if her portrait was safe. But Mr Brand does not believe that either, as he says he had already told his wife that it was uninjured."

"This Miss Black is a strong liar," said

Stephen. "I should not have guessed it from her face. She looked as straight and innocent as a child; but one never can tell."

"I imagine I do not look like a liar. But would you say if I also were accused of lying that you never can tell?"

Stephen was taken aback. He bit his little finger and frowned at the wonderful roses in front of him.

"I know you speak the truth," he said, "because you have spoken it to me. I should believe what you said—always—under any circumstances."

"You believe in my truthfulness from experience. Do you never believe by intuition?"

"Not often."

"When first I saw Miss Black I perceived that she was a perfectly honest, upright woman. I did not wait till she had given me any proof of it. I saw it."

"I certainly thought the same. To say the truth, I am surprised at her duplicity."

"In my case you judged by experience.

In her case I want you to go by intuition, by your first impression, which I know is the true one. I would stake my life upon it."

"I don't see how my intuitions would help her."

"Oh! yes, they will. Mr Brand is aware from the lift man, who saw you, that you were on the spot directly before he smelt smoke. Mr Brand will probably write to you."

"He has written already. He has asked me to see him on business to-morrow morning. He does not say what business."

"He is certain to try and find out from you what Miss Black was doing when you saw her in his flat. It seems you and Mr De Rivaz both left your cards on the table—why I can't think—but it shows you were both there. He came up himself next day and found them."

"We both sent messages to Brand by Miss Black."

"It seems she never gave them. She says now she forgot all about them."

Stephen shook his head.

"If Brand comes I shall be obliged to tell him the truth," he said.

"That was why I was so bent on seeing you. I am anxious you *should* tell him the truth."

Stephen looked steadily at her.

"What truth?" he said.

"Whatever you consider will disabuse his mind of the suspicion that she burned her brother's I O U. Mr De Rivaz' view of the truth is that the smoke came from a burnt sheet of his own drawing-paper."

"I am not accountable for De Rivaz. He can invent what he likes. That is hardly my line."

He coloured darkly. It was incredible to him that Anne could be goading him to support her friend's fabric of lies by another lie. He would not do it, come what might. But he felt that Fate was hard on him. He would have done almost anything at that moment to please her. But a lie—no.

"I fear your line would naturally be to tell the blackest lie that has ever been told yet, by repeating the damaging facts exactly as they are. If you do—to a man like him—not only will you help to ruin Miss Black, but you will give weight to this frightful falsehood which is being circulated against her. And if you, by your near-sighted truthfulness, give weight to a lie, it is just the same as telling one. No, I think it's worse."

Stephen smiled grimly. This was straight talk. Plain speaking always appealed to him even when, as now, it was at his expense.

"Are you certain that your friend did not burn her brother's I O U?" he said after a pause.

"I am absolutely certain. Remember her face. Now, Mr Vanbrunt, think. Don't confuse your mind with ideas of what women generally are. Think of her. Are not you certain too?"

"Yes," he said slowly, "I am. She is concealing something. She has done some

folly, and is bolstering it up by a stupid lie. But the other, that's swindling—no, she did not do that."

"Then help the side of truth," said Anne. "My own conviction is that she burned something compromising Mrs Brand, at Mrs Brand's dying request, under an oath of secrecy. And that is why her mouth is shut. But this is only a supposition. I ask you not to repeat it. I only mention it because you are so——" she shot a glance at him unlike any, in its gentle raillery, that had fallen to his lot for many a long day—"so stubborn."

He was unreasonably pleased.

"I should still be in a dry goods warehouse in Hull if I had not been what you call stubborn," he said, smiling at her.

"May I ask you a small favour for myself?" she said. "So far I have only asked for my friend."

"It seems hardly necessary to ask it. Only mention it."

"If my mother talks to you, and she talks to you a great deal, do not mention

to her our—our conversation of last night. It would be kinder to me."

Stephen bowed gravely. He was surprised. It had not struck him that Anne had not told her mother. A brand-new idea occurred to him, namely that Anne and her mother were not in each other's confidence. H'm! That luminous idea required further thought.

"And now," said Anne, "having got out of you all I want, I will immediately desert you for my other neighbour." And she spoke no more to Stephen that night.

. . . . . .

"My dear," said the Duke of Quorn to Anne as they drove home, "it appeared to me that you and Vanbrunt were on uncommonly good terms to-night. Is there any understanding between you?"

"I think he is beginning to have a kind of glimmering of one."

"Really! Understandings don't as a rule lead to marriage. Misunderstandings generally bring about those painful dislocations of life. But the idea struck me this

evening—I hope needlessly—that I might after all have to take that richly gilt personage to my bosom as my son-in-law."

"Mr Vanbrunt asked me to marry him yesterday, and I refused him."

The Duke experienced a slight shock, tinged with relief.

"Does your mother know?" he said at last in an awed voice.

"Need you ask?"

"Well, if she ever finds out, for goodness' sake let her inform me of the fact. Don't give me away, Anne, by letting out that I knew at the time. If she thought I was an accomplice of the crime—your refusal—really if she once got that idea into her head—— But next time she tackles Vanbrunt, perhaps he will tell her himself. Oh, heavens!"

"I asked him not to mention it to her."

The Duke sighed.

"And so he really did propose at last. I thought your mother had choked him off. Most men would have been. Well,

Anne, I'm glad you did not accept him. I don't hold with mixed marriages. In these days people talk as if class were nothing, and the fact of being well-born of no account. And, of course, it's a subject one can't discuss, because certain things, if put into words, sound snobbish at once. But they are true all the same. The middle classes have got it screwed into their cultivated heads that education levels class differences. It doesn't, but one can't say so. Not that Vanbrunt is educated, as I once told him."

"Oh! come, father. I am sure you did not."

"You are right, my dear. I did not. He said himself one day, in a moment of expansion, that he regretted that he had never had the chance of going to a public school, or the University, and I said the sort of life he had led was an education of a high order. So it is. That man has lived. Really when I come to think of it, I almost —no, I don't—Ahem! Associate freely with all classes, but marry in your own.

That is what I say when no one is listening. By no one I mean of course yourself, my dear."

Anne was silent. There had been days when she had felt that difference keenly though silently. Those days were past.

"Vanbrunt is a Yorkshire dalesman, with Dutch trading blood in him. It is extraordinary how Dutch the people look near Goole and Hull. I shall like him better now. I always have liked him till—the last few months. You would never say Vanbrunt was a gentleman, but you would never say he wasn't. He seems apart from all class. There is no hall-mark upon him. He is himself. So you would not have him, my little Anne? That's over. It's the very devil to be refused, I can tell you. I was refused once. It was some time ago, as you may imagine, but—I have not forgotten it. I learned what London looks like in the dawn, after walking the streets all night. So it's his turn to wear out the pavement now, is it! Poor man! He'll take it hard in a bottled-up way. When next I see him

I shall say: 'Aha! money can't buy everything, Vanbrunt.'"

"Oh! no, father. You won't be so brutal."

"No, my dear, I daresay I shall not. I shall pretend not to know. Really I have a sort of regard for him. Poor Vanbrunt!"

CHAPTER XI

"C'est son ignorance qui fixe son malheur."
—MAETERLINCK.

DID you ever, as a child, see ink made? Did you ever watch, with wondering intentness, the mixing of one little bottle of colourless fluid—which you imagined to be pure water—with another equally colourless? No change. Then at last, into the cup of clear water, the omnipotent parent hand pours out of another tiny phial two or three crystal drops.

The latent ink rushes into being at the contact of those few drops. The whole

cup is black with it, transfused with impenetrable darkness, terrible to look upon.

We are awed, partly owing to the exceeding glory of the magician with the Vandyke hand, who knows everything, and who can work miracles at will, and partly because we did not see the change coming. We were warned that it would come by that voice of incarnate wisdom. We were all eyes. But it was there before we knew. Some of us, as older children, watch with our ignorant eyes the mysterious alchemy in our little cup of life. We are warned, but we see not. We somehow miss the sign. The water is clear, quite clear. Something more is coming, straight from the same Hand. In a moment all is darkness.

A wiser woman than Janet would perhaps have known, would at any rate have feared, that a certain small cloud on her horizon, no larger than a man's hand, meant a great storm. But until it broke she did not realize that that ever-increasing ominous pageant had any connection with the hurricane that at last fell upon her: just as

some of us see the rosary of life only as separate beads, not noticing the divine constraining thread, and are taken by surprise when we come to the cross.

. . . . .

The cloud first showed itself, or rather Janet first caught sight of it, on a hot evening towards the end of June, when Fred returned from London, whither he had been summoned by Mr Brand, a fortnight after his wife's death.

The days which had passed since Cuckoo's death had not had power to numb the pain at Janet's heart. The shock had only so far had the effect of shifting the furniture of her mind into unfamiliar, jostling positions. She did not know where to put her hand on anything, like a woman who enters her familiar room after an earthquake, and finds the contents still there, but all huddled together or thrown asunder.

Her deep affection for her brother, and her friend Cuckoo, were wrenched out of place, leaving horrible gaps. She had always felt a vague repulsion to Monkey

Brand, with his dyed hair and habit of staring too hard at her. The repulsion towards him had shifted, and had crashed up against her love for Fred, and Monkey Brand had acquired a kind of dignity, even radiance. Even her love for George had altered in the general dislocation. Its halo had been jerked off. Who was true? Who was good? She looked at him wistfully, and with a certain diffidence. She felt a new tenderness for him. George had noticed the change in her manner towards him since her return from London, and, not being an expert diver into the recesses of human nature, he had at first anxiously inquired whether she still loved him the same. Janet looked slowly into her own heart before she made reply. Then she turned her grave gaze upon him. "More," she said, as every woman, whose love is acquainted with grief must answer if she speaks the truth.

It was nearly dark when Janet caught the sounds of Fred's dog-cart, driving swiftly along the lanes, too swiftly considering the

darkness. He drove straight to the stables, and then came out into the garden, where she was walking up and down waiting for him. It was such a small garden, merely a strip out of the field in front of the house, that he could not miss her.

He came quickly towards her, and even in the starlight she saw how white his face was. Her heart sank. She knew Fred had gone to London in compliance with a request from Mr Brand. Had Mr Brand refused to renew his bond, or to wait?

Fred took her suddenly in his arms, and held her closely to him. He was trembling with emotion. His tears fell upon her face. She could feel the violent beating of his heart. She could not speak. She was terrified. She had never known him like this.

"You have saved me," he stammered, kissing her hair and forehead. "Oh! my God! Janet, I will never forget this, never while I live. I was ruined, and you have saved me."

She did not understand. She led him to

the garden seat, and they sat down together. She thought he had been drinking. He generally cried when he was drunk. But she saw in the next moment that he was sober.

"Will Mr Brand renew?" she said, though she knew he would not. Monkey Brand never renewed.

Fred laughed. It was the nervous laugh of a shallow nature, after a hairbreadth escape.

"Brand will not renew, and he will not wait," he said. "You know that as well as I do. Janet, I misjudged you. All these awful days, while I have been expecting the blow to fall—it meant ruin, sheer ruin, for you as well as me—all this time I thought you did not care what became of me. You seemed so different lately, so cold."

"I did care."

"I know. I know now. You are a brave woman. It was the only thing to do. If you had not burnt it he would have foreclosed. And of course I shall

pay him back when I can. I said so. He knows I'm a gentleman. He has my word for it. A gentleman's word is as good as his bond. I shall repay him gradually."

"I don't understand," said Janet, who felt as if a cold hand had been laid upon her heart.

"Oh! You can speak freely to me. And to think of your keeping silence all this time—even to me. You always were one to keep things to yourself, but you might have just given me a hint. My I O U is not forthcoming, and Brand as good as knows you burned it. He knows you went up to his flat and burned something when his wife was dying. He wasn't exactly angry; he was too far gone for that, as if he couldn't care for anything one way or the other. He looks ten years older. But, of course, he's a business man, whether his wife is alive or dead, and I could see he was forcing himself to attend to business to keep himself from thinking. He said very little. He was very distant. Infernally

distant he was. He is no gentleman, and he doesn't understand the feelings of one. If it hadn't been that he was in trouble, and well — for the fact that I had borrowed money of him—I would not have stood it for a moment. I'm not going to allow any cad to hector over me, be he who he may. He mentioned the facts. He said he had always had a high opinion of you, and that he should come down and see you on the subject next week. You must think what to say, Janet."

"I never burned your I O U," said Janet in a whisper, becoming cold all over. It was a revelation to her that Fred could imagine she was capable of such a dishonourable action.

"Why, Fred," she said, deeply wounded, "you know I could not do such a thing. It would be the same as stealing."

"No, it wouldn't," said Fred, with instant irritation, "because you know I should pay him back. And so I will—only I can't at present. And, of course, you knew too, you must have guessed, that your two

thousand —— And as you are going to be married, that is important too. I should have been ruined, sold up, if that I O U had turned up, and you yourself would have been in a fix. You knew that when you got hold of it and burned it. Come, Janet, you can own to me you burned it—between ourselves."

"I burnt nothing."

Fred peered at her open-mouthed.

"Janet, that's too thin. You must go one better than that when Brand comes. He knows you burnt something when you went up to his flat."

"I burnt nothing," said Janet again. It was too dark to see her face.

Did she realise that the first heavy drops were falling round her of the storm that was to wreck so much?

"Well," said Fred, after a pause, "I take my cue from you. You burnt nothing then. I don't see how you are going to work it, but that's your affair. . . . But oh, Janet, if that cursed paper had remained! If you had known what I've been going

through since you came home a fortnight ago, when my last shred of hope left me when I found you had not spoken to the Brands. It wasn't only the money—that was bad enough—it wasn't only that—but——"

And Fred actually broke down, and sobbed with his head in his hands. Presently, when he recovered himself, he told her, in stammering, difficult words, that he had something on his conscience, that his life had not been what it should have been, but that a year ago he had come to a turning-point; he had met some one—even his light voice had a graver ring in it—some one who had made him feel how—in short, he had fallen in love, with a woman like herself, like his dear Janet—good and innocent, a snowflake; and for a long time he feared she could never think of him, but how at last she seemed less indifferent, but how her father was a strict man and averse to him from the first. And if he had been sold up, all hope—what little hope there was—would have been gone.

"But, please God, now," said Fred, "I will make a fresh start. I've had a shock lately, Janet. I did not talk about it, but I've had a shock. I've thought of a good many things. I mean to turn round and do better in future. There are things I've done, that lots of men do and think nothing of them, that I won't do again. I mean to try from this day forward to be worthy of her, to put the past behind me; and if I ever do win her—if she'll take me in the end—I shall not forget, Janet, that I owe it to you."

He kissed her again with tears.

She was too much overcome to speak. Cuckoo had repented, and now Fred was sorry too. It was the first drop of healing balm which had fallen on that deep wound which Cuckoo's dying voice had inflicted how many endless days ago.

"It is Venetia Ford," said Fred shyly, but not without triumph. "You remember her? She is Archdeacon Ford's eldest daughter."

A recollection rose before Janet's mind

of the eldest Miss Ford, with the pretty pink and white empty face, and the demure, if slightly supercilious, manner that befits one conscious of being an Archdeacon's daughter. Janet knew her slightly, and admired her much. The eldest Miss Ford's conversation was always markedly suitable. Her sense of propriety was only equalled by her desire to impart information. Her slightly clerical manner resembled the full-blown Archidiaconal deportment of her parent, as home-made marmalade resembles an orange. Archdeacon Ford was a pompous, much-respected prelate, with private means. Mrs Smith was distantly related to the Fords, and very proud of the connection. She seldom alluded to the eldest Miss Ford without remarking that Venetia was her ideal of what a perfect lady should be.

"O Fred, I am so glad!" said Janet, momentarily forgetting everything else in her rejoicing that Fred should have attached himself seriously at last, and to a woman for whom she felt respectful admiration, who had

always treated herself with the cold civility that was, in Janet's eyes, the hall-mark of social and mental superiority.

"And does she like you?" she said, with pride. She could not see Fred any longer, but her mind's eye saw him—handsome, gay, irresistible. Of course she adored him.

"Sometimes I think she does," said Fred, "and sometimes I'm afraid she doesn't." And he expounded at great length, garnished with abundant detail, his various meetings with her; how on one occasion she had hardly looked at him; on another she had spoken to him of Browning—that was the time when he had bought Browning's works; on a third, how there had been another man there—a curate—a beast, but thinking a lot of himself; on a fourth she had said that balls—the Mudbury ball where he had danced with her—were an innocent form of recreation, etc., etc.

Janet drank in every word. It reminded her, she said, of "her and George." Indeed, there were many salient points of resem-

blance between the two courtships. The brother and sister sat long together hand in hand in the soft summer night. Only when she got up at last did the thought of the missing I O U return to Janet.

"O Fred!" she said, as they walked towards the house, "supposing after all your I O U turns up? How dreadful! What would happen?"

"It won't turn up," said Fred, with a laugh.

When Janet was alone in her room she remembered again, with pained bewilderment, that Fred had actually believed that she had destroyed that missing paper. It did not distress her that Monkey Brand evidently believed the same. She would, of course, tell him that he was mistaken. *But Fred!* He ought to have known better. Her thoughts returned speedily to her brother's future. He would settle down now, and be a good man, and marry the eldest Miss Ford. She felt happier about him than she had done since Cuckoo's death. Her constant prayer, that he might

repent and lead a new life, had evidently been heard.

As she closed her eyes she said to herself, "I daresay Fred and Venetia will be married the same day as George and me."

. . . . .

Monkey Brand appeared at Ivy Cottage a few days later. Janet was in the field with Fred, taking the setter puppies for a run, when the "Trefusis Arms" dog-cart from Mudbury drove up, and Nemesis, in the shape of Monkey Brand, got slowly down from it, wrong leg first. Even in the extreme heat Monkey Brand wore a high hat and a long buttoned-up frock-coat and varnished boots. As he came towards them in the sunshine, there was a rigid, controlled desolation in his yellow lined face, which made Janet feel suddenly ashamed of her happiness in her own love.

"I had better go," said Fred hurriedly. "I don't want to be uncivil to the brute in my own house."

"Go!" said Janet. "But, of course, you

must stop. Mr Brand has come down on purpose to see us."

She went forward to meet him, and, as he took her hand somewhat stiffly, he met the tender sympathy in her clear eyes, and winced under it.

His face became a shade less rigid. He looked shrunk and exhausted, as if he had undergone the extreme rigour of a biting frost. Perhaps he had.

"I have come to see you on business," he said to Janet, hardly returning Fred's half nervous, half defiant greeting.

Janet led the way into the little parlour, and they sat down in silence. Fred sat down near the door, and began picking at the rose in his buttonhole.

Monkey Brand held his hat in his hand. He took off one black glove, dropped it into his hat, and looked fixedly at it.

The cloud on Janet's horizon lay heavy over her whole sky. A single petal, loosened by a shaking hand, fell from Fred's rose on to the floor.

"I am sure, Miss Black," said Monkey

Brand, "that you will offer me an explanation respecting your visit to my flat when my wife was dying."

"I went up at her wish," said Janet, breathing hard. She seemed to see again Cuckoo's anguished fading eyes fixed upon her.

"Why?"

"She asked me to go and see if her picture was safe."

"I had already told her it was safe."

Janet did not answer.

The rose in Fred's buttonhole fell petal by petal.

Monkey Brand's voice had hardened when he spoke again.

"I am sure," he said, and for a moment he fixed his dull sinister eyes upon her, "that you will see the advisability, the necessity, of telling me why you burnt some papers when you clandestinely visited my flat."

"I burnt nothing."

He looked into his hat. Janet's bewildered eyes followed the direction of his,

and looked into his hat too. There was nothing in it but a glove.

"There were ashes of burnt papers in the grate," he continued. "The lift man saw you leave the room, which had smoke in it. A valuable paper, your brother's I O U is missing. I merely state established facts, which it is useless, which it is prejudicial, to you to contradict."

"I burnt nothing," said Janet again, but there was a break in her voice. Her heart began to struggle like some shy woodland animal, which suddenly sees itself surrounded.

Monkey Brand looked again at her. His wife had loved her. Across the material, merciless face of the money-lender a flicker passed of some other feeling besides the business of the moment; as if, almost as if he would not have been averse to help her if she would deal straightforwardly with him.

"You were my wife's friend," he said after a moment's pause. "She often spoke of you with affection. I also regarded you with

high esteem. A few days before you came to stay with us I was looking over my papers one evening, and I mentioned that your brother's I O U would fall due almost immediately. She said she believed it would ruin him if I called in the money then. I said I should do so, for I had waited once already against my known rules of business. I never wait. I should not be in the position which I occupy to-day if I had ever waited. She said, 'Wait at least till after Janet's wedding. It might tell against her if her brother went smash just before.' I replied that I should foreclose, wedding or none. She came across to me, and, by a sudden movement, took the I O U out of my hand before I could stop her. 'I won't have Janet distressed,' she said. 'I shall keep it myself till after the wedding,' and she locked it up before my eyes in a cabinet I had given her, in which she kept her own papers. I seldom yield to sentiment, but she—she recalled to me my own wedding—and in this instance I did so. It was the last evening we spent at home alone together.

She went much to the theatre and into society, and I seldom had time to accompany her."

Monkey Brand stopped a moment. Then he went on:

"My wife saw you alone when she was dying. She was evidently anxious to see you alone. It was like her, even then, to think of others. If you tell me, on your word of honour, that she asked you to go up to the flat and burn that I O U, and that she told you where to find it—No; if she even gave you leave, as you were no doubt anxious on the subject,—if you assure me that she yielded to your entreaties, and that she even gave you leave to destroy it,—I will believe it. I will accept your statement. The last wish of my wife—if you say it *was* her wish—is enough for me." Monkey Brand looked out of the window at the still noonday sunshine. "I would abide by it," he said, and his face worked.

"She never spoke to me on the subject of the I O U," said Janet, two large tears rolling down her quivering cheeks. "She never

gave me leave to burn it. I didn't burn it. I burnt nothing."

"Janet," almost shrieked Fred, nearly beside himself. "Janet, don't you see that —that—— Confess. Tell him you did it. We both know you did it. Own the truth."

Janet looked from one to the other.

"I burnt nothing," she said, but her eyes fell. Her word had never been doubted before.

Both men saw she was lying.

Monkey Brand's face changed. It became once again as many poor wretches had seen it, whose hard-wrung money had gone to buy his wife's gowns and diamonds.

He got up. He took his glove out of the crown of his hat, put on his hat in the room, and walked slowly out of the house. In the doorway he looked back at Janet, and she saw, directed at her for the first time, the expression with which she was to grow familiar, that which meets the swindler and the liar.

The brother and sister watched in silence

the rigid little departing figure, as it climbed back wrong leg first into the dog-cart and drove away.

Then Fred burst out.

"Oh! you fool, you fool!" he stammered, shaking from head to foot. "Why didn't you say Mrs Brand told you to burn it? His wife was his soft side. Oh! my God! what a chance, and you didn't take it. That man will ruin us yet. I saw it in his face."

"But she didn't tell me to burn it."

Janet looked like a bewildered, distressed child, who suddenly finds herself in a room full of machinery of which she understands nothing, and whose inadvertent touch, as she tries to creep away, has set great malevolent wheels whirring all round her.

"I daresay she didn't," said Fred fiercely, and he flung out of the room.

He went and stood a long time leaning over the fence into the paddock where his yearlings were.

"It's an awful thing to be a fool," he said to himself.

CHAPTER XII

"Il n'est aucun mal qui ne naisse, en dernière analyse —d'une pensée étroite, ou d'un sentiment mediocre."
—MAETERLINCK.

THE storm had fallen on Janet at last. She saw it was a storm, and met it with courage and patience, and without apprehension as to what so fierce a hurricane might ultimately destroy, what foundations its rising floods might sweep away. She suffered dumbly under the knowledge that Monkey Brand and Fred both firmly believed her to be guilty, suffered dumbly the gradual alienation of her brother, who never forgave her her obtuseness when a way of escape had been offered her, and who shivered under an acute anxiety as to what Monkey Brand would do next, together with a gnawing suspense respecting the eldest Miss Ford, who had become the object of marked attentions on the part of a colonial Bishop.

Janet said to herself constantly in these

days, "Truth will prevail." She did not believe in the principle, but in her version of it. Her belief in the power of truth became severely shaken as the endless July days dragged themselves along, each slower than the last. Truth did not prevail. The storm prevailed instead. Foundations began to crumble.

How it came about it would be difficult to say, but the damning evidence against Janet, the suspicion, the almost certainty of her duplicity, reached Easthope.

Mrs Trefusis seized upon it to urge her son to break with Janet. He resisted with stubbornness his mother's frenzied entreaties. Nevertheless after a time his fixity of purpose was undermined by a sullen, growing suspicion that Janet was guilty. Fred had hinted as much. Fred's evident conviction of Janet's action, and inability to see that it was criminal, his confidential assertion that the money would be repaid, pushed George slowly to the conclusion that Janet had been her brother's catspaw—perhaps not for the first time. George felt with deep if silent

indignation, that with him, her future husband if with any one, Janet ought to be open, truthful. But she was not. She repeated her obvious lie even to him when at last he forced himself to speak to her on the subject. His narrow, upright nature abhorred crookedness, and, according to his feeble searchlight, he deemed Janet crooked.

His mother's admonitions began to work in him like leaven. How often she had said to him, "She has lied to others. The day will come when she will lie to you." That day had already come. Perhaps his mother was right after all. He had heard men say the same thing. "What is bred in the bone will come out in the flesh." "Take a bird out of a good nest," etc., etc.

And George who, in other circumstances, would have defended Janet to the last drop of his blood, who would have carried her over burning deserts till he fell dead from thirst—George, who was capable of heroism on her behalf—weakened towards her.

She had fallen in love with him in the beginning, partly because he was "straighter"

than the men she associated with. Yet this very rectitude which had attracted her was now alienating her lover from her, as perhaps nothing else could have done. Strange back-blow of Fate, that the cord which had drawn her towards him should tighten to a noose round her neck.

George weakened towards her.

It seems to be the miserable fate of certain upright, closed natures, who take their bearings from without, always to fail when the pinch comes; to disbelieve in those whom they obtusely love when suspicion falls on them, to be alienated from them by their success, to be discouraged by their faults, incredulous of their higher motives, repelled by their enthusiasms.

George would not have failed if the pinch had not come. Like many another man, found faithful because his faith had not been put to the test, he would have made Janet an excellent and loving husband, and they would probably have spent many happy years together—if only the pinch had not come. Anne early divined, from Janet's

not very luminous letters, that George was becoming estranged from her. Anne came down for a Sunday to Easthope early in July, and quickly discovered the cause of this estrangement (which Janet had not mentioned) in the voluble denunciations of Mrs Trefusis, and the sullen unhappiness of her son.

Mrs Trefusis had wormed out all the most damning evidence against Janet, partly from Fred's confidence to George, and partly from Monkey Brand, with whom she had had money dealings, and to whom she applied direct. She showed Anne the money-lender's answer, in its admirable restrained conciseness, with its ordered sequence of inexorable facts. Anne's heart sank as she read it, and she suddenly remembered Janet's words in delirium. "I have burnt them all. Everything. There is nothing left."

The letter fell from her nerveless hand. She looked at it, momentarily stunned.

"And this is the woman," said Mrs Trefusis, scratching the letter towards her

with her stick, and regaining possession of it, "this is the woman whom you pressed me, only a month ago, to receive as my daughter-in-law. Didn't I say she came of a bad stock? Didn't I say that what was bred in the bone would come out in the flesh? George would not listen to me then, but my poor deluded boy is beginning to see now that I was right."

Mrs Trefusis wiped away two small tears with her trembling claw-like hand. Anne could not but see that she was invincibly convinced of Janet's guilt.

"You think I am vindictive, Anne," she said. "You may be right; I know I was at first, and perhaps I am still. I always hated the connection, and I always hated her. But—but it's not *only* that now. It's my boy's happiness. I must think of him. He is my only son, and I can't sit still and see his life wrecked."

"I am certain Janet did not do it," said Anne suddenly, her pale face flaming. "George and you may believe she did, if you like. I don't."

Anne walked over to Ivy Cottage the same afternoon, and Janet saw her in the distance, and fled out to her across the fields and fell upon her neck. But even Anne's tender entreaties and exhortations were of no avail. Janet understood at last that her mechanically-repeated formula was ruining her with her lover. But she had promised Cuckoo to say it, and she stuck to it.

"Why does not George believe in me even if appearances are against me?" said Janet at last. "I would believe in him."

"That is different."

"How different?"

"Because you are made like that, and he isn't. It's a question of temperament. You have a trustful nature. He has not. You must take George's character into consideration. It is foolish to love a person who is easily suspicious, and then allow him to become suspicious. You have no right to perplex him. Just as some people who care for us must have it made easy to them all the time to go on caring for us. If there is any strain or difficulty, or if

they are put to inconvenience, they will leave us."

Janet was silent.

"As you and George both love each other," continued Anne, "can't you say something to him? Don't you see it would be only right to say a few words to him, which will show him—what I am sure is the truth—that you are concealing something, which has led to this false suspicion falling on you?"

Janet shook her head. "He ought to know it's false," she said.

"Could not you say to *him*, even though you cannot say so to your brother or Mr Brand—that you burnt some compromising papers at Mrs Brand's dying request? He might believe that, for it is known that you *did* burn papers, dearest, and it is also obvious that you must have burnt a good many. That one I O U does not account for the quantity of ashes."

"I could not say that," said Janet, whitening. "And besides," she added hastily, "I have said so many times" (and indeed she

had) "that I burnt nothing, that George would not know what to believe if I say first one thing and then another."

"He does not know what to believe now. Unless you can say something to reassure his mind, you will lose your George."

"You believe in me?"

"Implicitly."

"Then why doesn't George?" continued Janet, with the feminine talent for reasoning in a circle. "That is the only thing that is necessary. Not that I should say things I can't say, but that he should trust me. I don't care what other people think so long as he believes in me."

She, who had never exacted anything heretofore, whose one object had been to please her George, now made one demand upon him. It was the first and last which she ever made upon her lover. And he could not meet it.

"His belief is shaken."

"Truth will prevail," said Janet stubbornly.

"It will no doubt in the end, but in the

meanwhile? And how if the truth is masked by a lie?"

Janet did not answer. Perhaps she did not fully understand. She saw only two things in these days: one, that George ought to believe in her; and the other, that, come what might, she would keep the promise made to Cuckoo on her death-bed. She constantly remembered the rigid dying face, the difficult whisper: "Promise me that whatever happens you will never tell anyone that you have burnt anything."

"I promise."

"You swear it."

"I swear it."

That oath she would keep.

Anne returned to London with a heavy heart. She left no stone unturned. She interviewed De Rivaz and Stephen on the subject, as we have seen. But her efforts were unavailing, as far as George was concerned. The affair of the burning of papers was hushed up, but it had reached the only

person who had the power to wreck Janet's happiness.

Some weeks after Anne's visit Janet one day descried the large figure of Stephen stalking slowly up across the fields. Janet tired her eyes daily in scanning the fields in the direction of Easthope, but a certain person came no more by that much frequented way.

The millionaire had a long interview with Janet, but his valuable time was wasted. He could not move her. He told her that he firmly believed the missing I O U would turn up, and that in the meanwhile he had paid Mr Brand, and that she might repay him at her convenience. He could wait. For a moment she was frightened, but a glance at Stephen's austere, quick eyes, bent searchingly upon her, reassured her. She trusted him at once. It was never known what he had said to Monkey Brand, as to his having seen Janet in the burnt flat, but Monkey Brand gained nothing from the discussion of that compromising fact—except his money.

Fred was awed by the visit of Stephen, and by the amazing fact that he had paid Monkey Brand. Fred said repeatedly that it was the action of a perfect gentleman, exactly what he should have done if he had been in Stephen's place. He let George hear of it at the first opportunity. But the information had no effect on George's mind, except that it was vaguely prejudicial to Janet.

Why had she accepted such a large sum from a man of whom she knew next to nothing, whom she had only seen once before for a moment, and that an equivocal one? Women should not accept money from men. *And why did he offer it?*

He asked these questions of himself. To Fred he only vouchsafed a nod, to show that he had heard what Fred had waylaid him to say.

Some weeks later still, in August, De Rivaz came to Ivy Cottage, hat in hand, stammering, deferential, to ask Janet to allow him to paint her. He would do anything, take rooms in the neighbourhood,

make his convenience entirely subservient to hers if she would only sit to him. He saw with a pang that she was not conscious that they had met before. She had forgotten him, and he did not remind her of their first meeting. He knew that hour had brought trouble upon her. Her face showed it. The patient, enduring spirit was beginning to look through the exquisite face. Her beauty overwhelmed him. He trembled before it. He pleaded hard, but she would not listen to him. She said apathetically that she did not wish to be painted. She was evidently quite unaware of the distinction which he was offering her. His name had conveyed nothing to her. He had to take his leave at last, but, as he walked away in the rain, he turned and looked back at the house.

"I will come back," he said, his thin face quivering.

It was a wet August, and the harvest rotted on the ground. No one came to Ivy Cottage along the sodden footpath from Easthope. A slow anger was rising in

Janet's heart against her lover, the anger that will invade at last the hearts of humble sincere natures, when they find that love and trust have not gone together.

George never openly broke with Janet, never could be induced to write the note to her which, his mother told him, it was his duty to write. No. He simply stayed away from her, week after week, month after month. When his mother urged him to break off his engagement formally, he said doggedly that Janet could see for herself that all was over between them.

The day came at last when Janet met him suddenly in the streets of Mudbury, on market day. He took off his hat in answer to her timid greeting, and passed on looking straight in front of him.

Perhaps he had his evil hour that night, for Janet was very fair. Seen suddenly, unexpectedly, she seemed more beautiful than ever. And she was to have been his wife.

After that blighting moment, when even Janet perceived that George was determined

not to speak to her; after that Janet began to see that when foundations are undermined that which is built upon them will one day totter and—fall.

CHAPTER XIII

"The heart asks pleasure first,
And then, excuse from pain;
And then, those little anodynes
That deaden suffering;

And then, to go to sleep;
And then if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor,
The liberty to die."

—Emily Dickinson.

There are long periods in the journey of life when "the road winds uphill all the way." There are also long periods when the dim plain holds us, endless day after day, till the last bivouac fires of our youth are quenched in its rains.

But when we look back across our journey, do we not forget alike the hill and the plain? Do we not rather remember that

one turn, exceeding sharp, of the narrow inevitable way, what time the light failed, and the ground yawned beneath our feet, and we knew fear?

There is a slow descent, awful, step by step, into a growing darkness, which those know who have strength to make it. Only the strong are broken on certain wheels. Only the strong know the dim landscape of Hades, that world which underlies the lives of all of us.

I cannot follow Janet down into it. I can only see her as a shadow, moving among shadows; going down unconsciously with tears in her eyes, taking, poor thing, her brave, loving unselfish heart with her, to meet anguish, desolation, desertion, and at last despair. If we needs must go down that steep stair we go alone, and who shall say how it fared with us? Nature has some appalling beneficent processes, of which it is not well to speak. Life has been taught at the same knee, out of the same book, and when her inexorable disintegrating hand closes over us, the abhorrent darkness, from

which we have shrunk with loathing, becomes our only friend.

In the following autumn and winter Janet slowly descended, inch by inch, step by step, that steep stair. She reached at last the death of love. She thought she reached it many times before she actually touched it. She believed she reached it when the news of George's engagement penetrated to her. But she did not in reality. No, she hoped against hope to the last day, to the morning of his wedding. She did not know she hoped. She supposed she had long since given up all thought of a reconciliation between her and her lover. But when the wedding was over, when he was really gone, then something broke within her—the last string of the lyre over which blind Hope leans.

There are those who tell us that we have not suffered till we have known jealousy. Janet's foot reached that lowest step, and was scorched upon it.

Only then she realised that she had never,

never believed that he could really leave her. Even on his wedding morning she had looked out across the fields, by which she had so often seen him come, which had been so long empty of that familiar figure. She knew he was far away at the house of the bride, but nevertheless she expected that he would come to her, and hold her to his heart, and say: "But, Janet, I could never marry anyone but you. You know such a thing could never be. What other woman could part you and me, who cannot part?" And then the evil dream would fall from her, and she and George would look gravely at each other, and the endless, endless pain would pass away.

Wrapt close against the anguish of love there is always a word such as this with which human nature sustains its aching heart—poor human nature which believes that, come what come may, Love can never die.

"Some day," the woman says to herself, half knowing that that day can never dawn,

"some day I shall tell him of these awful months, full of days like years, and nights like nothing, please God, which shall ever be endured again. Some day—it may be a long time off—but some day I shall say to him: 'Why did you leave me?' And he will tell me his foolish reasons, and we shall lean together in tears. And surely some day I shall say to him: 'I always burnt your letters for fear I might die suddenly and others should read them. But see, here are the envelopes, every one. That envelope is nearly worn out. Do you remember what you said inside it? That one is still new. I only read the letter it had in it once. How could you—could you write it?'"

"Some day," the man says to himself, when the work of the day is done—"some day my hour will come. She thinks me harsh and cold, but some day, when these evil days are past, and she understands, I will wrap her round with a tenderness such as she has never dreamed of. I will show

her what a lover can be. She finds the world hard, and its ways a weariness—let her; but some day she shall own to me, to me here in this room, that she did not know what life was, what joy and peace were, until she let my love take her."

Yet he half knows she will never come, that woman whose coming seems inevitable as spring. So the heart comforts itself, telling itself fairy stories until the day dawns when Reality's stern, beneficent figure enters our dwelling, and we know at last that not one word of all we have spoken in imagination will ever be said. What we have suffered we have suffered. The one for whom it was borne will hear no further word from us.

The moth and the rust have corrupted.

The thieves have broken through and stolen.

Then rise up, lay hold of your pilgrim's staff, and take up life with a will.

CHAPTER XIV

"My river runs to thee:
Blue sea, wilt welcome me?"
—Emily Dickinson.

The winter, that dealt so sternly with Janet, smiled on Anne. She spent Christmas in London, for the Duke was, or at least he said he was, in too delicate a state of health to go to his ancestral halls in the country, where the Duchess had repaired alone, believing herself to be but the herald of the rest of her family; and where she was expending her fearful energy on Christmas trees, magic-lanterns, ventriloquists, entertainments of all kinds for children and adults, tenants, inmates of workhouses, country neighbours, Sunday School teachers, Mothers' Unions, Ladies' Working Guilds, Bands of Hope, etc., etc. She was in her element.

Anne and her father were in theirs. The Duke did not shirk the constant inevitable

duties of his position, but by nature he was a recluse, and at Christmas-time he yielded to his natural bias. Anne also lived too much on the highway of life. She knew too many people, her sympathy had drawn towards her too many insolvent natures. She was glad to be for a time out of the pressure of the crowd. She and her father spent a peaceful Christmas and New Year together, only momentarily disturbed by the frantic telegrams of the Duchess, commanding Anne to despatch five hundred presents at one shilling suitable for school-girls, or forty ditto at half-a-crown for young catechists.

The New Year came in in snow and fog. But it was none the worse for that. On this particular morning Anne stood a long time at the window of her sitting-room, looking out at the impenetrable blanket of the fog. The newsboys were crying something in the streets, but she could hear nothing distinctive except the word "city."

Presently she took out of her pocket two

letters, and read them slowly. There was no need for her to read them. Not only did she know them by heart, but she knew exactly where each word came on the paper. "Martial law" was on the left-hand corner of the top line of the second sheet. "Dependent on Kaffir labour" was in the middle of the third page. They were dilapidated-looking letters, possibly owing to the fact that they were read last thing every night and first thing every morning, and that they were kept under Anne's pillow at night, so that if she waked she could touch them. It is hardly necessary to add that they were in Stephen's small, cramped, mercantile handwriting.

Stephen had been recalled to South Africa on urgent business early in the autumn. He had been there for nearly three months. During that time, after intense cogitation, he had written twice to Anne. I am under the impression that he was under the impression that those two documents were love letters. At any rate, they were the only two letters which Stephen ever com-

posed which could possibly be classed under that heading. And their composition cost him much thought. In them he was so good as to inform Anne of the population of the town he wrote from, its principal industries, its present distress under martial law. He also described the climate. His nearest approach to an impulsive outburst was a polite expression of hope that she and her parents were well, and that he expected to be in England again by Christmas. Anne kissed the signature, and then laughed till she cried over the letter. Stephen did, as a matter of fact, indite a third letter, but it was of so bold a nature—it expressed a wish to see her again—that, after reading it over about twenty times, he decided not to risk sending it.

When Anne was an old woman she still remembered the population of two distracted little towns in South Africa, and their respective industries.

Stephen was as good as his word. His large foot was once more planted on English soil a day or two before Christmas. In

spite of an overwhelming pressure of business, he had found time to dine with Anne and her father several times since he arrived. The Duke had met him at a directors' meeting, and quite oblivious of Anne's refusal of him, had pressed him to come back with him to dinner. The Duke asked him constantly to dine after that. The old attraction between the two men renewed its hold.

These quiet evenings round the fire seemed to Stephen to contain the pith of life. The Duke talked well, but on occasion Stephen talked better. Anne listened. The kitchen cat, now alas! grown large and vulgar, with an unmodulated purr, was allowed to make a fourth in these peaceful gatherings, and had coffee out of Anne's saucer, sugared by Stephen, every evening.

Then, for no apparent reason, Stephen ceased to come.

Anne, who had endured so much suspense about him, could surely endure a little more. But it seemed she could not. For a week he did not come. In that one week she aged perceptibly. The old pain took her again,

the old anger and resentment at being made to suffer, the old fierceness, "which from tenderness is never far." She had thought that she had conquered these enemies so often, that she had routed them so entirely, that they could never confront her again. But they did. In the ranks of her old foes a new one had enlisted—Hope; and Hope, if he forces his way into the heart where he has been long a stranger, knows how to reopen many a deep and barely healed wound, which will bleed long after he is gone.

And where were Anne's patience, her old steadfastness and fortitude? Could they be worn out?

As she stood by the window, trying to summon her faithless allies to her aid, her father came in, with a newspaper in his hand.

"This is serious," he said, "about Vanbrunt."

She turned upon him like lightning.

The Duke tapped the paper.

"I knew Vanbrunt was in difficulties," he

said. "A week ago, when he was last here, he advised me sell out certain shares. It seems he would not sell out himself. He said he would see it through, and now the smash has come. I'm afraid he's ruined."

A beautiful colour rose to Anne's face. Her eyes shone. She felt a sudden inrush of life. She became young, strong, alert.

Her father was too much preoccupied to notice her.

"Vanbrunt is a fine man," he said. "He had ample time to get out. But he stuck to the ship, and he has gone down with it. I'm sorry. I liked him."

"Are you sure he is really ruined?"

"The papers say so. They also say he can meet his liabilities." The Duke read aloud a paragraph which Anne did not understand. "That spells ruin even for him," he said.

He took several turns across the room.

"He has been working day and night for the last week," he said, "to avoid this crash. It might have been avoided. He told me a little when he was last here, but in confi-

dence. He is straight, but others weren't. He has not been backed. He has been let in by his partners."

The Duke sighed, and went back to his study on the ground floor.

Anne opened the window with a trembling hand, and peered out into the fog.

. . . . . .

Stephen was sitting in his inner room at his office in the City, biting an already sufficiently bitten little finger. His face bore the mark of the incessant toil of the last week. His eyes were fixed absently on the electric light. His mind was concentrated with unabated strength on his affairs, as a magnifying glass may focus its light into flame on a given point. He had fought strenuously, and he had been beaten —not by fair means. He could meet the claims upon him. He could, in his own language, "stand the racket;" but in the eyes of the financial world he was ruined. In his own eyes he was on the verge of ruin. But a man with an iron nerve can find a foothold on precipices where another

turns giddy and loses his head. Stephen's courage rose to the occasion. He felt equal to it. His strong, acute, alert mind worked indefatigably hour after hour, while he sat apparently idle. He was not perturbed. He saw his way through.

He heard the newsboys in the streets crying out his bankruptcy, and smiled. At last he drew a sheet of paper towards him, and became absorbed in figures.

He was never visible to anyone when he was in this inner chamber. His head clerk knew that he must not on any pretext be disturbed. And those who knew Stephen discovered that he was not to be disturbed with impunity.

He looked up at last, and rose to his feet, shaking himself like a dog.

"I can carry through," he said. "They think I can't, but I can. But if the worst comes to the worst—which it shall not—I doubt if I shall have a shilling left."

He took a turn in the room.

"Wait a bit, you fools," he said half aloud; "if your cowardice does ruin me,

wait a bit. I have made money not once, nor twice,—and I can make it again."

A tap came to the door.

He reddened with sudden anger. Did not Jones know that he was not to be interrupted till two, when he must meet, and, if possible, pacify certain half frantic, stampeding shareholders?

The door opened with decision, and Anne came in. For a moment Stephen saw the aghast face of his head clerk behind her. Then Anne shut the door and confronted him.

The image of Anne was so constantly with Stephen, her every little trick of manner, from the way she turned her head, to the way she folded her hands, was all so carefully registered in his memory, had become so entirely a part of himself, that it was no surprise to him to see her. Did he not see her always! Nevertheless, as he looked at her, all power of going forward to meet her, of speaking to her, left him. The blood seemed to ebb slowly from his heart. and his grim face blanched.

"How did you come here?" he stammered at last, his voice sounding harsh and unfamiliar.

"On foot."

"In this fog?"

"Yes."

"Who came with you?"

"I came alone. I wished to speak to you. I hear you are ruined."

"I can meet my liabilities," he said proudly.

"Is it true that you have lost two millions?"

"It is—possibly more."

A moment of terror seemed to pass over Anne. The lovely colour in her cheek faded suddenly. She supported herself against the table, with a shaking gloved hand. Then she drew herself up, and said in a firm voice:

"Do you remember that night in Hamilton Gardens when you asked me to marry you?"

Stephen bowed. He could not speak. Even his great strength was only just enough.

"I refused you because I saw you were convinced that I did not care for you. If I had told you I loved you then you would not have believed it."

Stephen's hand gripped the mantelpiece. He was trembling from head to foot. His eyes never left her.

"But now the money is gone," she said, becoming paler than ever, "perhaps, now the dreadful money is gone, you will believe me if I tell you that I love you."

And so Stephen and Anne came home to each other at last—at last.

"My dear," said the Duke to Anne the following day, "this is a very extraordinary proceeding of yours. You refuse Vanbrunt when he is rich, and accept him when he is tottering on the verge of ruin. It seems a reversal of the usual order of things. What will your mother say?"

"I have already had a letter from her, thanking Heaven that I was not engaged to him. She says a good deal about how

there is a Higher Power which rules things for the best."

"I wish you would allow it freer scope," said the Duke. "All the same, I should be thankful if she were here. It will be my horrid, vulgar duty to ask Vanbrunt what he has got; what small remains there are of his enormous fortune. I hear on good authority that he is almost penniless. One is not a parent for nothing. I wish to goodness your mother were in town. She always did this sort of thing herself with a dreadful relish on previous occasions. You must push him into my study, my dear, after his interview with you. I will endeavour to act the heavy father. That is his bell. I will depart. I have letters to write."

The Duke left the room, and then put his head in again.

"It may interest you to know, Anne," he said, "that I've seen handsomer men, and I've seen better dressed men, and I've even seen men of rather lighter build, but I've not seen any man I like better than your ex-millionaire."

Two hours later, after Stephen's departure, the Duke returned to his daughter's sitting-room, and sank exhausted into a chair.

"Really I can't do this sort of thing twice in a lifetime," he said faintly. "Have you any salts handy? No—you—need not fetch them. I'm not seriously indisposed. How heartlessly blooming you are looking, Anne, while your parent is suffering. Now remember, if ever you want to marry again, don't send your second husband to interview me, for I won't have it."

"Come, come, father. Didn't you tell me to push him into your study? And I thought you looked so impressive and dignified when I brought him in. Quite a model father."

"I took a firm attitude with him," continued the Duke. "I saw he was nervous. That made it easier for me. Vanbrunt is a shy man. I was in the superior position. Hateful thing to ask a man for his daughter. I said, 'Now look here, Vanbrunt, I understand you

wish to marry my daughter. I don't wish it myself, but——'"

"Oh! father, you never said that?"

"Well, not exactly. I owned to him that I could put up with him better than with most, but that I could not let you marry to poverty. He asked me what I considered poverty. That rather stumped me. In fact, I did not know what to say. It was not his place to ask questions."

"Father, you did promise me you would let me marry him on eight hundred a year."

"Well, yes, I did. I don't like it, but I did say so. In short, I told him you had worked me up to that point."

"And what did he say?"

"He said he did not think in that case that any real difficulty about money need arise; that at one moment he had stood to lose all he had, and he had lost two millions, but that his affairs had taken an unexpected turn during the last twenty-four hours, and he believed he could count on an odd million or so, certainly on

half a million. I collapsed, Anne. My attitude fell to pieces. It was Vanbrunt who scored. He had had a perfectly grave face till then. Then he smiled grimly, and we shook hands. He did not say much, but what he did say was to the point. I think, my dear, that while Vanbrunt lasts, his love for you will last. He has got it very firmly screwed into him. But these interviews annihilate me."

The Duke raised the kitchen cat to his knee, and rubbed it behind the ears.

"I made the match, Anne," he said; "you owe it all to me. I asked him to dinner when I met him at that first directors' meeting a fortnight ago. I had it in my mind then."

"Father! You *know* you had not."

"Well, no. I had not. I did not think of it! I can't say I did. But still, I was a sort of bulwark to the whole thing. You had my moral support. I shall tell your mother so."

CONCLUSION

"So passes, all confusedly
As lights that hurry, shapes that flee
About some brink we dimly see,
The trivial, great,
Squalid, majestic tragedy
Of human fate."

—WILLIAM WATSON

I WISH life were more like the stories one reads, the beautiful stories, which, whether they are grave or gay, still have picturesque endings. The hero marries the heroine, after insuperable difficulties, which in real life he would never have overcome: or the heroine creeps down into a romantic grave, watered by our scalding tears. At any rate, the story is gracefully wound up. There is an ornamental conclusion to it. But life, for some inexplicable reason, does not lend itself with docility to the requirements of the lending libraries, and only too frequently fails to grasp the dramatic moment for an impressive close. None

of us reach middle age without having watched several violent melodramas, whose main interest lies further apart from their moral than we were led, in our tender youth, to anticipate. We have seen better plays off the stage than even Shakespeare ever put on. But Shakespeare finished his, and pulled down the curtain on them; while, with those we watch in life, we have time to grow grey between the acts; and we only know the end has come, when at last it does come, because the lights have been going out all the time, one by one, and we find ourselves at last alone in the dark.

Janet's sweet melancholy face rises up before me as I think of these things, and I could almost feel impatient with her, when I remember how the one dramatic incident in her uneventful life never seemed to get itself wound up. The consequences went on, and on, and on, till all novelty and interest dropped inevitably from them and from her.

Some of us come to turning-points in

life, and don't turn. We become warped instead. It was so with Janet.

Is there any turning-point in life like our first real encounter with anguish, loneliness, despair?

I do not pity those who meet open-eyed these stern angels of God, and wrestle with them through the night, until the day breaks, extorting from them the blessings that they waylaid us to bestow. But is it possible to withhold awed compassion for those who, like Janet, go down blind into Hades, and struggle impotently with God's angels as with enemies? Janet endured with dumb, uncomplaining dignity she knew not what, she knew not why; and came up out of her agony, as she had gone down into it—with clenched empty hands. The greater hope, the deeper love, the wider faith, the tenderer sympathy—these she brought not back with her. She returned gradually to her normal life with her conventional ideas crystallised, her small crude beliefs in love and her fellow-creatures withered.

That was all George did for her.

The virtues of narrow natures such as George's seem of no use to anyone except possibly to their owner. They are as great a stumbling-block to their weaker brethren, they cause as much pain, they choke the spiritual life as mercilessly, they engender as much scepticism in unreasoning minds, as certain gross vices. If we are unjust, it matters little to our victim what makes us so, or whether we have prayed to see aright, if for long years we have closed our eyes to unpalatable truths.

George's disbelief in Janet's rectitude, which grew out of a deep sense of rectitude, had the same effect on her mind as if he had deliberately seduced and deserted her. The executioner reached the gallows of his victim by a clean path. That was the only difference. So much the better for him. The running noose for her was the same. Unreasoning belief in love and her fellow-creatures was followed by an equally unreasoning disbelief in both.

Janet kept her promise. She held firm.

Amid all the promises of the world, made only to be broken, kept only till the temptation to break them punctually arrived, amid all that débris one foolish promise remained intact, Janet's promise to Cuckoo.

George married. Then, shortly afterwards, Fred married the eldest Miss Ford, and found great happiness. His bliss was at first painfully streaked with total abstinence, but he gradually eradicated this depressing element from his new home life. And in time his slight insolvent nature reached a kind of stability, through the love of the virtuous female prig, the "perfect lady," to whom he was all in all. Fred changed greatly for the better after his marriage, and in the end he actually repaid Stephen part of the money the latter had advanced to Monkey Brand, for Janet's sake.

Janet lived with the young couple at first, but Mrs Fred did not like her. She knew vaguely, as did half the neighbourhood, that Janet had been mixed up in something discreditable, and that her engagement had been broken off on that account. Mrs

Fred was, as we know, a person of the highest principles; and high principles naturally shrink from contact with any less exalted. Several months after the situation between the two women had become untenable, Janet decided to leave home. She had nowhere to go, and no money; so, like thousands of other women in a similar predicament, she decided to support herself by education. She had received no education herself, but that was not in her mind any bar to imparting it. Anne, who had kept in touch with her, interfered peremptorily at this point, and when Janet did finally leave home, it was to go to Anne's house in London, till "something turned up."

It was a sunny day in June when Janet arrived in London, for the first time since her ill-fated visit there a year ago. She looked up at Lowndes Mansions, as her four-wheeler plodded past them, towards Anne's house in Park Lane. Even now, a year after the great fire, scaffoldings were still pricking up against the central tower of the larger block of building. The damage

caused by the fire was not even yet quite repaired. Perhaps some of it would never be repaired.

Mrs Trefusis was sitting with Anne on this particular afternoon, confiding to her some discomfortable characteristics of her new daughter-in-law, the wife whom she had herself chosen for her son.

"I am an old woman," said Mrs Trefusis, "and of course I don't march with the times, the world is for the young, I know that very well; but I must own, Anne, I had imagined that affection still counted for something in marriage."

"I wonder what makes you think that."

"Well, not the marriages I see around me, my dear, that is just what I say, though what has made you so cynical all at once, I don't know. But I ask you—look at Gertrude. She does not know what the word 'love' means."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"I am. She has been married to George three months, and it might be thirty years by the way they behave. And she seemed

such a particularly nice girl, and exceedingly sensible, and well brought up. I should have thought she would at any rate *try* to make my boy happy, after all the sorrow he has gone through. But they don't seem to have any real link to each other. It isn't that they don't get on. They do in a way. She is sharp enough for that. She does her duty by him. She is nice to him, but all her interests, and she has interests, seem to lie apart from anything to do with him."

"Does he mind?"

"I never really know what George minds or doesn't mind," said Mrs Trefusis. "It has been the heaviest cross of the many crosses I have had to bear in life, that he never confides in me. George has always been extremely reticent. Thoughtful natures often are. He will sit for hours without saying a word, looking ——"

"*Glum* is the word she wants," said Anne to herself, as Mrs Trefusis hesitated.

"Reserved," said Mrs Trefusis. "He does not seem to care to be with Gertrude. And yet you know Gertrude is very taking,

and there is no doubt she is good-looking. And she sings charmingly. Unfortunately George does not care for music."

"She is really musical."

"They make a very handsome couple," said Mrs Trefusis plaintively. "When I saw them come down the aisle together I felt happier about him than I had done for years. It seemed as if I had been rewarded at last. And I never saw a bride smile and look as bright as she did. But somehow it all seems to have fallen flat. She didn't even care to see the photographs of George when he was a child, when I got them out the other day. She said she would like to see them, and then forgot to look at them."

Anne was silent.

"Well," said Mrs Trefusis, rising slowly, "I suppose the truth is that in these days young people don't fall in love as they did in my time. I must own Gertrude has disappointed me."

"I daresay she will make him a good wife."

"Oh! my dear, she does. She is an extremely practical woman, but one wants more for one's son than a person who will make him a good wife. If she were a less good wife, and cared a little more about him, I should feel less miserable about the whole affair."

Mrs Trefusis sighed heavily.

"I must go," she said, in the voice of one who might be persuaded to remain.

But Anne did not try to detain her, for she was expecting Janet every moment, though she did not warn Mrs Trefusis of the fact, for the name of Janet was never mentioned between Anne and Mrs Trefusis. Mrs Trefusis had once diffidently endeavoured to reopen the subject with Anne, but found it instantly and decisively closed. If Janet had existed in a novel, she would certainly have been coming up Anne's wide white staircase at the exact moment that Mrs Trefusis was going down them, but, as a matter of fact, Mrs Trefusis was packed into her carriage, and drove away, quite half a minute be-

fore Janet's four-wheeler came round the corner.

Anne's heart ached for Janet when she appeared in the doorway. She almost wished that Mrs Trefusis had been confronted with the worn white face of the only woman who had loved her son.

Janet and Anne kissed each other.

Then Janet looked at the wedding ring on Anne's finger, and smiled at her in silence.

Anne looked down tremulously, for fear lest the joy in her eyes should make Janet's heart ache, as her own heart had ached one little year ago, when she had seen Janet and George together in the rose garden.

"I am so glad," said Janet. "I did so wish that time at Easthope—do you remember?—that you could be happy too. It's just a year ago."

"Just a year," said Anne.

"I suppose you cared for him then," said Janet. "But I expect it was in a more sensible way than I did. You were always so much wiser than me. One lives and learns."

"I cared for him then," said Anne, busying herself making tea for her friend. When she had made it she went to a side table, and took from it a splendid satin tea cosy, which she placed over the teapot. It had been Janet's wedding present to her.

Janet's eyes lighted on it with pleasure.

"I am glad you use it every day," she said. "I was so afraid you would only use it when you had company."

Anne stroked it with her slender white hand. There was a kind of tender radiance about her which Janet had never observed in her before.

"It makes me happy that you are happy," said Janet. "I only hope it will last. I felt last year that you were in trouble. Since then it has been my turn."

"I wish happiness could have come to both of us," said Anne.

"Do you remember our talk together," said Janet, spreading out a clean pocket-handkerchief on her knee, and stirring her tea, "and how sentimental I was? I

daresay you thought at the time how silly I was about George. I see now what a fool I was."

Anne did not answer. She was looking earnestly at Janet, and there was no need for her now to veil the still gladness in her eyes. They held only pained love and surprise.

"And do you remember how the clergyman preached about not laying up our treasure on earth?"

"I remember everything."

"I've often thought of that since," said Janet, with a quiver in her voice, which brought back once more to Anne the child-like innocent creature of a year ago, whom she now almost failed to recognise, in her new ill-fitting array of cheap cynicism.

"I did lay up my treasure upon earth," continued Janet, drawn momentarily back into her old simplicity by the presence of Anne. "I didn't seem able to help it. George was my treasure. I mustn't think of him any more because he's married. But I cared too much. That was where I was wrong."

"One cannot love too much," said Anne, her fingers closing over her wedding ring.

"Perhaps not," said Janet, "but then the other person must love too. George did not love me enough to carry through. When the other person cares, but doesn't care strong enough, I think that's the worst. It's like what the Bible says. The moth and rust corrupting. George did care, but not enough. Men are like that."

"Some one else cares," said Anne diffidently — "poor Mr de Rivaz. He cares enough."

"Yes," said Janet apathetically. "I daresay he does. We've all got to fall in love some time or other. But I don't care for him. I told him so months ago. I don't mean to care for any one again. I've thought a great deal about things this winter, Anne. It's all very well for you to believe in love. I did once, but I don't now."

Janet got up, and, as she turned, her eyes fixed suddenly.

"Why, that's the cabinet," she said below her breath. "Cuckoo's cabinet!" Her face

quivered. She saw again the scorched room, the pile of smoking papers on the hearth, the flame which had burnt up her happiness with them.

Anne did not understand.

"Stephen gave me that cabinet a few days ago," she said.

"It was Cuckoo's. It used to stand under her picture."

"Don't you think it may be a replica?"

"No, it is the same," said Janet, passing her hand over the mermaid and her whale. "There is the little chip out of the dolphin's tail."

Then she shrank suddenly away from it, as if its touch scorched her.

"Where did you get the Italian cabinet?" said Anne to Stephen that evening, as he and De Rivaz joined her and Janet after dinner in her sitting-room.

"At Brand's sale. He sold some of his things when he gave up his flat in Lowndes Mansions. He has gone to South Africa for his boy's health."

Stephen opened it. Janet drew near.

"I had to have a new key made for it," he said, letting the front fall forward on his careful hand. "Look, Anne! how beautifully the drawers are inlaid."

He pulled out one or two of them.

Janet slowly put out her hand, and pulled out the lowest drawer on the left-hand side. It stuck, and then came out. It was empty like all the rest.

Stephen closed it, and then drew it forward again.

"Why does it stick?" he said.

He got the drawer entirely out, and looked into the aperture. Then he put in his hand, and pulled out something wedged against the slip of wood which supported the upper drawer, without reaching quite to the back of the cabinet. It was a crumpled, dirty sheet of paper. He tore it as he forced it out.

"It must have been in the lowest drawer but one," he said, "and fallen between the drawer and its support."

Janet was the first to see her brother's

signature, and she pointed to it with a cry.

It was the missing I O U.

"I always said it would turn up," said Stephen gently.

"But it's too late," said Janet hoarsely, "too late! too late! Oh! why didn't George believe in me!"

"He will believe now."

"It doesn't matter what he believes now. Why didn't he *know* I had not burnt it?"

"I believed in you," said De Rivaz, his voice shaking. "I knew you had not burnt it, though I saw you burning papers. Though I saw you with my own eyes, I did not believe."

There was a moment's pause. Her three faithful friends looked at Janet.

"I burnt nothing," she said.

Janet married De Rivaz at last, but not until she had nearly worn him out. It was after their marriage that he painted his marvellous portrait of her, a picture that was the outcome of a deep love, wed with genius.

She made him a good wife, as wives go, and bore him beautiful children, but she never cared for him as she had done for George. Later on her daughters carried their love affairs, not to their mother, but—to Anne.

GEOFFREY'S WIFE

GEOFFREY'S WIFE

"Oh, how this spring of love resembleth
Th' uncertain glory of an April day."

EVERY one felt an interest in them. The mob-capped servants hung over the banisters to watch them go downstairs. Alphonse reserved for them the little round table in the window, which commanded the best view of the court, with its dusty flower-pots grouped round an intermittent squirt of water. Even the landlord, Monsieur Leroux, found himself often in the gateway when they passed in or out, in order to bow and receive a merry word and glance.

Even the *concierge*, who dwelt retired, aloof from the contact of the outer world in his narrow, key-adorned shrine, even he unbent to them and smiled back when

they smiled. It was a queer little old-fashioned hotel, rather out of the way. Nevertheless, young married couples *had* stayed there before. Their name, indeed, at certain periods of the year was Legion. There were other young married couples staying there at that very moment, but everybody felt that a peculiar interest attached to this young married couple. For one thing, they were so absurdly, so overwhelmingly happy. People, Monsieur Leroux himself, and others, had been happy in an early portion of their married lives, but not like this couple. People had had honeymoons before, but never one like this couple. Although they were English, they were so handsome and so sunny. And he was so well made and devoted, the chambermaids whispered. And, ah! how she was *piquante*, the waiters agreed.

They had a little sitting-room. It was not the best sitting-room, because they were not very rich; but Geoffrey (she considered Geoffrey such a lovely name, and so uncommon) thought it the most

delightful little sitting-room in the world when she was in it. And Mrs Geoffrey also liked it very much; oh! very much indeed.

He had had hard work to win her. Sometimes, when he watched her tangling many-coloured wools over the mahogany back of one of the tight horsehair chairs, he could hardly believe that she was really his wife, that they were actually on that honeymoon for which he had toiled and waited so long. Beneath the gaiety and the elastic spirit of youth there was a depth of earnestness in Geoffrey which his little wife vaguely wondered at and valued as something beyond her ken, but infinitely heroic. He looked upon her with reverence and thanked God for her. He had never had much to do with womankind, and he felt a respectful tenderness for everything of hers, from her prim maid to her foolish little shoe-lace, which was never tired of coming undone, and which he was never tired of doing up. The awful responsibility

of guarding such a treasure, and an overpowering sense of its fragility, were ever before his mind. He laughed and was gay with her, but in his heart of hearts there was an acute joy nigh to pain—a wonder that he should have been singled out from among the sons of men to have the one pearl of great price bestowed upon him.

They had come to Paris, and to Paris only, partly because it was the year of the Exhibition, and partly because she was not very strong, and was not to be dragged through snow and shaken in *diligences* like other ordinary brides. The bare idea of Eva in a *diligence*, or tramping in Switzerland, was not to be thought of. No; Geoffrey knew better than that. A quiet fortnight in Paris, the Opera, the Exhibition, Versailles, St Cloud, Notre Dame—these were dissipations calculated not to disturb the exquisite poise of a health of such inestimable value. He knew Paris well. He had seen it all in those foolish bachelor days, when he had rushed across the water with men com-

panions, knowing no better, and enjoying himself in a way even then.

And so he took her to St Cloud, and showed her the wrecked palace; and they wandered by the fountains and bought *gaufre* cake, which he told her was called "*plaisir*," only he was wrong—but what did that matter? And they went down to Versailles, and saw everything that every one else had seen, only they saw it glorified—at least he did. And they sat very quietly in Notre Dame, and listened to a half divine organ and a wholly divine choir, and Geoffrey looked at the sweet, awed face beside him, and wondered whether he could ever in all his life prove himself worthy of her. And though of course, being a Protestant, he did not like to pray in a Roman Catholic Church, still he came very near it, and was perhaps none the worse.

And now the fortnight was nearly over. Geoffrey reflected with pride that Eva was still quite well. Her mother, of whom he stood in great awe—her mother, who

had an avowed disbelief in the moral qualities of second sons—even her mother would not be able to find any fault. Why, James himself, his eldest brother, whom she had always openly preferred, could not have done better than he had done. He who had so longed to take her away was now almost longing to take her back home, just for five minutes, to show her family how blooming she was, how trustworthy he had proved himself to be.

The fortnight was over on Saturday, but at the last moment they decided to stay till Monday. Was it not Sunday, the night of the great illuminations? suggested Alphonse reproachfully. Were not the Champs Elysées to present a spectacle? Were not fires of joy and artifice to mount from the Bois de Boulogne? Surely Monsieur and Madame would stay for the illuminations! Was not the stranger coming from unknown distances to witness the illuminations? Were not the illuminations in honour of

the Exhibition? It could not be that Monsieur would suffer Madame to miss the illuminations.

Eva was all eagerness to stay. Two more nights in Paris. To go out in the summer evening, and see Paris *en fête!* Delightful! Geoffrey was not to say a single word! He did not want to! Well, never mind, he was not to say one; and she was going instantly, that very moment, to stop Grabham packing up, and he was to go instantly, that very moment, to let Monsieur Leroux know they intended to stay on.

And they both went instantly, that very moment, and they stayed on. And he was very severe in consequence, and refused to allow her to tire herself on Saturday, and insisted on her resting all Sunday afternoon, as a preparation for the dissipation of the evening. They had met some English friends on Sunday morning, who had invited them to their house in the Champ Elysées in the course of the evening to see the illuminations from their balcony.

And then towards night Geoffrey became more autocratic than ever, and insisted on a woollen gown instead of a muslin, because he felt certain that it would not be so hot towards the middle of the night as it then was. She said a great many very unkind things to him, and they sallied forth together at nine o'clock as happy as two pleasure-seeking children.

"You will not be of return till the early morning. I see it well," said Monsieur Leroux, bowing to them. "Monsieur does well to take the little *châle* for Madame for fear later she should feel herself fresh. But as for rain, will not Madame leave her umbrella with the *concierge?* No? Monsieur prefers? *Eh bien! Bon soir!*"

It was a perfect night. It had been fiercely hot all day, but it was cooler now. The streets were already full of people, all bearing the same way toward the Champ Elysées. With some difficulty Geoffrey procured a little carriage, and in a few minutes they were swept into the chattering, idle, busy throng, and slowly making

their way toward the Langtons' house. Every building was gay with coloured lanterns. The Place de la Concorde shone afar like a belt of jewelled light. The great stone lions glowed upon their pedestals. Clear as in noonday sunshine, the rocking sea of merry faces met Eva's delighted gaze; she beaming with the rest.

And now they were driving down the Champs Elysées. The fountains leaped in coloured flame. The Palais de l'Industrie gleamed from roof to basement, built in fire. The Arc de Triomphe, crowned with light, stood out against the dark of the moonless sky, flecked by its insignificant stars.

"Beautiful! Beautiful!" and Eva clapped her hands and laughed.

And now it was the painful, the desolating duty of the driver to tell them he could take them no further. Carriages were not allowed beyond a certain hour, and either he must take them back or put them down. Geoffrey demurred. Not so Mrs Geoffrey. In a moment she had sprung out of the carriage, and was laughing at the novel idea

of walking in a crowd. Geoffrey paid his man and followed. There was plenty of room to walk in comfort, and Eva, on her husband's arm, wished the Langtons' house miles away, instead of a few hundred yards. She said she must and would walk home. Geoffrey must relent a little, or she on her side might not be so agreeable as she had hitherto shown herself. She was quite certain that she should catch a cold if she drove home in the night air in an open carriage. What was that he was mumbling? That if he had known *that* he would not have brought her? But she was equally certain that it would not hurt her to walk home. Walking was a very different thing from driving in open carriages late at night. An ignorant creature like him might not think so, but her mother would not have allowed her to do such a thing for an instant. Geoffrey quailed, and gave utterance to that sure forerunner of masculine defeat, that "he would see."

It was very delightful on the Langtons' balcony, with its constellation of swinging

Chinese lanterns. Eva leaned over and watched the people, and chatted to her friends, and was altogether enchanting—at least Geoffrey thought so.

The night is darkening now. The streets blaze bright and brighter. The crowd below rocks and thickens and shifts without ceasing. Long lines of flame burn red along the Seine, and mark its windings as with a hand of fire. The great electric light from the Trocadéro casts heavy shadows against the sky. Jets of fire and wild vagaries of leaping stars rush up out of the Bois de Boulogne.

And now there is a contrary motion in the crowd, and a low murmur swells, and echoes, and dies, and rises again. The torchlight procession is coming. That square of fire, moving slowly down from the Arc de Triomphe through the heart of the crowd, is a troop of mounted soldiers carrying torches. Hark! Listen to the low, sullen growl of the multitude, like a wild beast half aroused.

The army is very unpopular in Paris

just now. See, as the soldiers come nearer, how the crowd sweeps and presses round them, tossing like an angry sea. Look how the soldiers rear their horses against the people to keep them back. Hark again to that fierce roar that rises to the balcony and makes little Eva tremble; the inarticulate voice of a great multitude raised in anger.

They have passed now, and the crowd moves with them. Look down the Champs Elysées, right down to the cob-web of light which is the Place de la Concorde. One moving mass of heads! Look up toward the Arc de Triomphe. They are pouring down from it on their way back from the Bois in one continuous black stream, good-humoured and light-hearted again as ever, now the soldiers have passed.

It is long past midnight. Ices and lemonade and sugared cakes have played their part. It is time to go home. The summer night is soft and warm, without a touch of chill. The other guests on the

Langtons' balcony are beginning to disperse. The Langtons look as if they would like to go to bed. The crowd below is melting away every moment. The play is over.

Eva is charmed when she hears that a carriage is not to be had in all Paris for love or money. To walk home through the lighted streets with Geoffrey! Delightful! A few cheerful leave-takings, and they are in the street again, with another English couple who are going part of the way with them.

"Come, wife, arm-in-arm," says the elder man; adding to Geoffrey, "I advise you to do the same. The crowd is as harmless as an infant, but it will probably have a little animal spirits to get rid of, and it won't do to be separated."

So arm-in-arm they went, walking with the multitude, which was not dense enough to hamper them. From time to time little groups of *gamins* would wave their hats in front of magisterial buildings and sing the prohibited Marseillaise, while

other bands of *gamins*, equally good-humoured, but more hot-headed, would charge through the crowd with Chinese lanterns and drums and whistles.

"Not tired?" asked Geoffrey regularly every five minutes, drawing the little hand further through his arm.

Not a bit tired, and Geoffrey was a foolish, tiresome creature to be always thinking of such things. She should say she *was* tired next time if he did not take care. In fact, now she came to think of it, she was *rather* tired by having to walk in such a heavy woollen gown.

"Don't say that, for Heaven's sake, if it is not true!" said the long-suffering husband, "for we have a mile in front of us yet."

The other couple wished them good-night and turned off down a side street. Everywhere the houses were putting out their lights. Night was gaining the upper hand at last. As they entered the Place de la Concorde, Geoffrey saw a small body of mounted soldiers crossing the Place. In-

stantly there was a hastening and pushing in the crowd, and the low, deep growl arose again, more ominous than ever. Geoffrey caught a glimpse of a sudden upraised arm, he heard a cry of defiance, and then—in a moment there was a roar and shout from a thousand tongues, and an infuriated mob was pressing in from every quarter, was elbowing past, was struggling to the front. In another second the whole Place de la Concorde was one seething mass of excited people, one hoarse jangle of tongues, one frantic effort to push in the direction the soldiers had taken.

Geoffrey, a tall, athletic Englishman, looked over the surging sea of French heads, and looked in vain for a quarter to which he could beat a retreat. He had not room to put his arm round his wife. She had given a little laugh, but she was frightened, he knew, for she trembled in the grasp he tightened on her arm. One rapid glance showed him there was no escape. The very lions at the corners were covered with human figures. They were in the heart of the

crowd. Its faint, sickening smell was in their nostrils.

"No, Eva," he said, answering her imploring glance, "we can't get out of this yet. We must just move quietly, with the rest, and wait till we get a chance of edging off. Lean on me as much as you can."

She was frightened and silent, and nestled close to him, being very small and slight of stature, and by nature timid.

Another deep roar, and a sudden rush from behind, which sent them all forward. How the people pushed and elbowed! Bah! The smell of a crowd! Who that has been in one has ever forgotten it?

This was a dreadful ordeal for his hothouse flower.

"How are you getting on?" he asked with a sharp anxiety, which he vainly imagined did not betray itself in his voice.

She was getting on very well, only—only could not they get out?

Geoffrey looked round yet again in despair. Would it be possible to edge a little to the left, to the right, anywhere?

He looked in vain. A vague, undefined fear took hold on him. "We must have patience, little one," he said. "Lean on me, and be brave."

His voice was cheerful, but he felt a sudden horrible sinking of the heart. How should he ever get her out of this jostling, angry crowd before she was quite tired out? What mad folly it had been to think of walking home! Poor Geoffrey forgot that there had been no other way of getting home, and that even his mother-in-law could not hold him responsible for a disagreement between the soldiers and the citizens.

Another ten minutes! Geoffrey cursed within himself the illumination and the soldiers and his own folly, and the rough men and rougher women, whom, do what he would, he could not prevent pressing upon her.

She did not speak again for some time, only held fast by his arm. Suddenly her little hands tightened convulsively on it, and a face pale to the lips was raised to his.

"Geoffrey, I'm very sorry," with a half sob, "but I'm afraid I'm going to faint."

The words came like a blow, and drove the blood from his face. The vague undefined fear had suddenly become a hideous reality. He steadied his voice and spoke quietly, almost sternly.

"Listen to me, Eva," he said. "Make an effort and attend, and do as I tell you. The crowd will move again in a moment. I see a movement in front already. Directly the move comes the press will loosen for an instant. I shall push in front of you and stoop down. You will instantly get on my back. I insist upon it. I will do my best to help you up, but I can't get hold of you in any other way. The faintness will pass off directly you are higher up and can get a breath of air. Now do you understand?"

She did not answer, but nodded.

There was a moment's pause, and the movement came. Geoffrey flung down his stick, drew his wife firmly behind him, and pressing suddenly with all his might upon

those in front, made room to stoop down. Two nervous hands were laid on his coat. Good God! she hesitated. A moment more, and the crowd behind would force him down, and they would both be lost. "Quick! Quick!" he shouted; but before the words had left his lips the trembling arms were clasped convulsively round his neck, and with a supreme effort he was on his legs again, skaking like a leaf with the long horror of that moment's suspense.

But the tight clasp of the hands round his neck, the burden on his strong shoulders, nerved him afresh. He felt all his vitality and resolution return tenfold. He could endure anything which he had to endure alone, now that horrible anxiety for her was over. He could no longer tell where he was. He was bent too much to endeavour to do anything except keep on his feet. A long wait! Would the crowd never disperse? Moving, stopping, pushing, pressing, stopping again. Another pause, which seemed as if it would never end. A contrary motion now, and he had not room to

turn! No. Thank Heaven! A tremor through the crowd, and then a fierce snarl and a rush. A violent push from behind. A plunge. Down on one knee. Good God! A blow on the mouth from some one's elbow. A wild struggle. A foot on his hand. Another blow. Up again. Up, only to strike his foot against a curbstone, and to throw all his weight away from a sudden pool of water on his left, into which he is being edged.

The great drops are on his brow, and his breath comes short and thick. He staggers again. The weight on him and his fall are beginning to tell. But as his strength wanes a dogged determination takes its place. He steels his nerves and pulls himself together. It is only a question of time. He will and must hold out. His whole soul is centred on one thing, to keep his feet. Once down —and—he clenches his teeth. He will not suffer himself to think. He is bruised and aching in every limb with the friction of the crowd. Drums begin to beat in his temples, and his mouth is bleeding. There is a mist

of blood and dust before his eyes. But he holds on with the fierce energy of despair. Another push. God in Heaven! almost down again! He can see nothing. A frantic struggle in the dark. The arms round his neck tremble, and he hears a sharp-drawn gasp of terror. Hands from out of the darkness clutch him up, and he regains his footing once more. "Courage, Monsieur," says a kind voice, and the hands are swept out of his. He tries to move his lips in thanks, but no words come. There is a noise in the crowd, but it is as a feeble murmur to the roar and sweep and tumult of many waters that is sounding in his ears. He cannot last much longer now. He is spent. But the crowd is thinning. If he can only keep his feet a few minutes more! The crowd is thinning. He catches a glimpse of ground in front of him. But it sways before him like the waves of the sea. One moment more. He stumbles aside where he feels there is space about him.

There is a sudden hush and absence of

pressure. *He is out of the crowd.* He is faintly conscious that the tramp of many feet is passing but not following him. The pavement suddenly rises up and strikes him down upon it. He cannot rise again. But it matters little, it matters little. It is all over. The fight is won, and she is safe. He tries to lift his leaden hand to unloose the locked fingers that hurt his neck. At his touch they unclasp, trembling. She has not fainted then. He almost thought she had. He raises himself on his elbow, and tries to wipe the red mist from his eyes that he may see her the more clearly. She slips to the ground, and he draws her to him with his nerveless arms. The street lamps gleam dull and yellow in the first wan light of dawn, and as his haggard eyes look into hers, her face becomes clear even to his darkening vision—and—*it is another woman!* Another woman! A poor creature with a tawdry hat and paint upon her cheek, who tries to laugh, and then, dimly conscious of the sudden agony of the gray, blood-stained face, whimpers for mercy, and limps away

into a doorway, to shiver and hide her worn face from the growing light.

. . . . . .

It was one of the English acquaintances of the night before who found him later in the day, still seeking, still wandering from street to street.

His old friend Langton came to him and took him away from the hotel to his own house. Alphonse wept and the *concierge* could not restrain a tear.

"And have they found *her* yet?" asked Mrs Langton that night of her husband when he came in late.

His face was very white.

"Yes," he said, and turned his head away. "I've been to—I've seen—no one could have told—you would not have known who it was. And all her little things, her watch and rings—they were all gone. But the maid knew by the dress. And—and I wanted to save a lock of hair, but"—his voice broke down.—"So I got one of the little gloves for him. It was the only thing I could."

He pulled out a half-worn tan glove, cut and dusty with the tramp of many feet, which the new wedding ring had worn ever so slightly on the third finger. He laid it reverently on the table and hid his face in his hands.

"If he could only break down," he said at last. "He sits and sits, and never speaks or looks up."

"Take him the little glove," said his wife softly. And Langton took it.

The sharpness of death had cut too deep for tears, but Geoffrey kept the little glove, and—he has it still.

THE PITFALL

THE PITFALL

PART I

"Oh Thou who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
Beset the Road I was to wander in."
—OMAR KHAYYÁM.

LADY MARY CARDEN sat near the open window of her blue and white boudoir looking out intently, fixedly across Park Lane at the shimmer of the trees in Hyde Park. It was June. It was sunny. The false gaiety of the season was all around her; flickering swiftly past her in the crush of carriages below her window; dawdling past her in the walking and riding crowds in the park. She looked at it without seeing it. Perhaps she had had enough of it, this strange conglomeration of alien elements and foreign bodies, this *bouille-à-baisse* which is called "The

Season." She had seen it all year after year for twelve years, varying as little as the bedding out of the flowers behind the railings. Perhaps she was as weary of society as most people become who take it seriously. She certainly often said that it was rotten to the core.

She hardly moved. She sat with an open letter in her hand, thinking, thinking.

The house was very still. Her aunt, with whom she lived, had gone early into the country for the day. The only sound, the monotonous whirr of the great machine of London, came from without.

Mary was thirty, an age at which many women are still young, an age at which some who have heads under their hair are still rising towards the zenith of their charm. But Mary was not one of these. Her youth was clearly on the wane. She bore the imprint of that which ages—because if unduly prolonged it enfeebles—the sheltered life, a life centred in conventional ideas, dwarfed by a conventional religious code, a life feebly nourished on

cut and dried charities sandwiched between petty interests and pettier pleasures. She showed the mark of her twelve seasons, and of what she had made of life, in the slight fading of her delicate complexion, the fatigued discontent of her blue eyes, the faint dignified dejection of her manner, which was the reflection of an unconscious veiled surprise that she of all women—she the gentle, the good, the religious, the pretty Mary Carden was still—in short was still Mary Carden.

The onlooker would perhaps have shared that surprise. She was indubitably pretty, indubitably well bred, graceful, slender, with a delicate manicured hand, and fair waved hair. Her fringe, which seemed inclined to grow somewhat larger with the years, was nearly all her own. She possessed the art of dress to perfection. You could catalogue her good points. But somehow she remained without attraction. She lacked vitality, and those who lack vitality seldom seem to get or keep what they want, at any rate in this world.

She was the kind of woman whom a man marries to please his mother, or because she is an heiress, or because he has been jilted and wishes to show how little he feels it. She was not a first choice.

She was one of that legion of perfectly appointed women who at seventeen deplore the rapacity of the older girls in ruthlessly clutching up all the attention of the simpler sex; and who at thirty acidly remark that men care only for a pink cheek and a baby face.

Poor Mary was thinking of a man now, of a certain light-hearted simpleton of a soldier with a slashed scar across his hand, which a Dervish had given him at Omdurman, the man as commonplace as herself, on whom for no particular reason she had glued her demure, obstinate, adhesive affections twelve years ago.

Our touching faithfulness to an early love is often only owing to the fact that we have never had an adequate temptation to be unfaithful. Certainly with Mary it was so. The temptations had been pitiably inade-

quate. She had never swerved from that long-ago mild flirtation of a boy and girl in their teens, studiously thrown together by their parents. She had taken an unwearying interest in him. She had petitioned Heaven that he might pass for the Army, and he did just squeeze in. By the aid of fervent prayer she had drawn him safely through the Egyptian campaign, while other women's husbands and lovers fell right and left. He had not said anything definite before he went out, but Mary had found ample reasons for his silence. He could not bear to overshadow her life in case, etc., etc. But now he had been safely back a year, two years, and still he had said nothing. This was more difficult to account for. He was fond of her. There was no doubt about that. They had always been fond of each other. Every one had expected them to marry. His parents had wished it. Her aunt had favoured the idea with heavy-footed zeal. Her brother, Lord Rollington, when he had a moment to spare from his training-stable, had jovially opined that "Maimie"

would be wise to book Jos Carstairs while she could, as if she was not careful she might outstand her market.

Mary, who had for many years dreamed of gracefully yielding to Jos's repeated and urgent entreaties, had even begun to wonder whether it would not be advisable if one of her men relations were to "speak to Jos." Such things were done. As she had said to her aunt with dignity, "This sort of thing can't go on for ever," when her aunt—who yearned for the rest which, according to their own account, seems to elude stout persons—pleaded that difficulties clustered round such a course.

The course was not taken, for Jos suddenly engaged himself to a girl of seventeen, a new girl whom London knew not, the only child of one of those ruinous unions which had been swallowed up in a flame of scandal seventeen years ago, which had been forgotten for seventeen years all but nine days.

It was sedulously raked up again now. People whispered that Elsa Grey came of a bad stock; that Jos Carstairs was a bold

man to marry a woman with such antecedents; a woman whose mother had slipped away out of her intolerable home years ago for another where apparently life had not been more tolerable.

Jos brought his Elsa to see Mary, for he was only fit to wave his sword and say, "Come on, boys." He did not understand anything about anything. He only remembered that Mary was a tender, loving soul. Had she not shown herself so to him for years? So he actually besought Mary to be a friend to the beautiful young sombre creature whom he had elected to marry.

Mary behaved admirably according to her code, touched Elsa's hand, civilly offered the address of a good dressmaker (not her best one), and hoped they should meet frequently. The girl looked at her once, wistfully, intently, with unfathomable lustrous eyes, as of some untamed, prisoned, woodland creature, and then took no further notice of her.

That was a fortnight ago. They were to be married in three weeks.

Mary sighed, and looked once again for

the twentieth time at the letter in her hand. It was a long epistle from her bosom friend, Lady Francis Bethune, the electric tramways heiress, joylessly married to the handsomest man in London, the notorious Lord Francis Bethune.

"My dear," said the letter, "men are always like that. They are brutes, and it is no good thinking otherwise. They will throw over the woman they have loved for years for a flower-girl. You are too good for him. I have always thought so. (So had Mary.) But the game is not up yet. I could tell him things about his Elsa that would surprise him, not that he ought to be surprised at anything in her mother's daughter. He is coming to me this afternoon to tea. He said he was busy; but I told him he must come as it was on urgent business, and so it is. He is my trustee, you know, and there really is something wrong. Francis has been at it again. After the business is over I shall tell him a few things very nicely about that girl. Now, my advice to you is—chuck the Lestrange's

water-party this afternoon, and come in as if casually to see me. I shall leave you alone together, and you must do the rest yourself. You may pull it off yet, after what I shall say about Elsa, for Jos has a great idea of you. Wire your reply by code before midday."

Mary got up slowly, and walked to the writing-table. Should she go and meet him? Should she not? She would go. She wrote a telegram quickly in code form. She knew the code so well that she did not stop to refer to it. She and Jos had played at code telegrams when he was cramming for the Army. She rang for the servant and sent out the telegram. Then she sat down and took up a book. It was nearly midday, and too hot to go out.

But after a few minutes she cast it suddenly aside, and began to move restlessly about the room. What was the use of going, after all? What could she say to Jos if she did see him? How could she touch his heart? Like many another woman when she thinks of a man, Mary stopped

before a small mirror, and looked fixedly at herself. Was she not pretty? Had she not gentle, appealing eyes? See her little hand raised to put back a strand of fair hair. Was not everything about her pretty, and refined, and good? The vision of Elsa rose suddenly before her, with her dark, mysterious beauty and her formidable youth. Mary's heart contracted painfully. "I love him, and she doesn't," she said to herself, with bitterness. But Jos would never give up Elsa. She would make him miserable, but—he would marry her. Oh! what was the use of going to waylay him to-day? Why had she lent herself to Lady Francis's idiotic plan? Why had she accepted from her help that was no help? She would telegraph again to say she would not come after all. No. She would follow up her own telegram, and tell her friend that on second thoughts she did not care to see Jos.

She ran upstairs, put on her hat, and in a few minutes was driving in a hansom to Bruton Street. The Bethunes' footman

knew her and admitted her, though Lady Francis was technically "not at home."

Yes, her ladyship was in, but she was engaged with the doctor at the moment in the drawing-room. The footman hesitated. "They were a-tuning of the piano in her ladyship's boudoir," he said, and he tentatively opened the door of a room on the ground floor. It was Lord Francis' sitting-room.

"Was his lordship in?"

"No, his lordship had gone out early."

"Then I will wait here," said Mary, "if you will let her ladyship know that I am here."

The man withdrew.

Mary's face reddened with annoyance. She disliked the idea of telling Lady Francis she had changed her mind, and the discussion of the subject. Oh! why had she ever spoken of the subject at all? Why had she telegraphed that she would come?

The painful, reiterated stammering of the piano came to her from above. It seemed

of a piece with her own indecision, her own monotonous jealousy.

Suddenly the front door bell rang, and an instant later the footman came in with a telegram, put it on the writing-table, and went out again.

Her telegram! Then she was not too late to stop it. She need not explain after all.

The drawing-room door opened, and Lady Francis' high metallic voice sounded on the landing.

Mary seized up the pink envelope and crushed it in her hand! What? The drawing-room door closed again. The conference with the doctor was not quite over after all. She tore open the telegram and looked again at her foolish words before destroying them.

Then her colour faded, and the room went round with her. Who had changed what she had said? Why was it signed "Elsa"?

She looked at the envelope. It was plainly addressed—"Lord Francis Bethune."

She had never glanced at the address till this moment. The contents were in code as hers had been, but it was the same code, and before she knew she had done so, she had read it.

What did it mean? What *could* it mean? Why should Elsa promise to meet him after the Speaker's Stairs—to-day—at Waterloo main entrance?

Mary was not quick-witted, but after a few dazed moments she suddenly understood. Elsa was about to go away with Lord Francis. But what Elsa? Her heart beat so hard that she could hardly breathe. Could it be Elsa Grey?

As we piece together all at once a puzzle that has been too simple for us, so Mary remembered in a flash Elsa's enigmatical face, and a certain ball where she had seen —only for a moment as she passed—Lord Francis and Elsa sitting out together. Elsa had looked quite different then. It *was* Elsa Grey. She knew it. Degraded creature, not fit to be an honest man's wife.

Mary shook from head to foot under a

climbing, devastating emotion, which seemed to rend her whole being. The rival was gone from her path. Jos would come back to her.

As she stood stunned, half blind, trembling, a hansom dashed up to the door, and in a moment Lord Francis' voice was in the hall speaking to the footman.

"Any letters or telegrams?"

"One telegram on your writing-table, my lord."

The servant went on to explain something, Lady Mary Carden, etc., but his master did not hear him. He was in the room in a second, and had closed the door behind him. Lord Francis' beautiful, thin, reckless face was pinched and haggard. He seemed possessed by some fierce passion which had hold of him and drove him before it as a storm holds and spins a leaf.

Mary was frightened, paralysed. She had not known that men could be so moved. He did not even see her. He rushed to the writing-table, and swept

his eye over it. Then he gave a sharp, low, hardly human cry of rage and anguish, and turned to ring the bell. As he turned he saw her.

"I beg your pardon. I don't understand," he said hoarsely. "Why did my fool of a servant bring you in here?"

Then he saw the open telegram in her hand, and his face changed. It became alert, cold, implacable. There was a deadly pause. From the room above came the acute, persistent stammer of the piano.

He took the telegram from her nerveless hand, read it, and put it in his pocket. He picked up the envelope from the floor, and threw it into the waste-paper basket. Then he came close up to her, and looked her in the eyes. There was murder in his.

"It was in cypher," he said.

She was incapable of speech.

"But you understood it? Answer me. By—did you understand it, or did you not?"

"I did not." She got the words out.

"You are lying. You did, you paid spy. Now listen to me. If you dare to say one word of this to any living soul I'll ——"

The door suddenly opened, and Lady Francis hurried in.

"Sorry to keep you, my dear," said the high, unmodulated voice. "Old Carr was such a time. What! You here, Francis? I thought you had gone out."

"I have been doing my best to entertain Lady Mary till you appeared," he said.

"I came to say I'm engaged this afternoon," said Mary. "I can't go with you to your concert."

The footman appeared with another telegram.

Lord Francis opened it before it could reach his wife, and then tossed it to her.

"For you," he said, and left the room.

"Well, my dear," said Lady Francis, "in this you say you *will* come, and now you say you *won't*, or am I reading it wrong? I don't understand."

"I have changed my mind," said Mary

feebly. "I mean I can't throw over the Lestranges. I only ran in to explain. I must be going back now."

Lord Francis, who was in the hall, put her into her hansom and closed the doors. As he did so he leaned forward and said:

"If you dare to interfere with me you will pay for it."

PART II

"Ah! woe that youth should love to be
Like this swift Thames that speeds so fast,
And is so fain to find the sea,—
That leaves this maze of shadow and sleep,
These creeks down which blown blossoms creep,
For breakers of the homeless deep."

—Edmund Gosse.

The little river steamer, with its gay awning, was hitched up to the Speaker's Stairs. The Lestranges were standing at the gangway welcoming their guests. There was a crowd watching along the parapet of Westminster Bridge just above.

"Are we all here? It is past four," said Captain Lestrange to his wife.

Mrs Lestrange looked round. "Eighteen, twenty, twenty-four. Ah! Here is Lady Mary Carden, late as usual. She is the last. No. There is one more to come. Miss Grey."

"Which Miss Grey?"

"Why, the one Jos Carstairs is to marry. She is coming under my wing. And now she isn't here. What on earth am I to do? We can't wait for ever."

A tall white figure was advancing slowly, as if dragged step by step, through the shadow of the great grey building.

"She does not hurry herself," said Mrs Lestrange indignantly, and she did not welcome Elsa very cordially as she came on board. The youngest of the party had made all the rest of that distinguished gathering wait for her.

Mary, in a gown of immaculate white serge stitched with black, was sitting under the awning when Elsa passed her on her way towards a vacant seat lower down.

The two women looked fixedly at each other for a moment, and in that moment Mary saw that Elsa knew that she knew. Even in that short time Lord Francis had evidently warned the girl against her.

Do what she would, Mary could not help watching Elsa. This was the less difficult, as no one ever talked for long together to Mary. The seat next her was never resolutely occupied. Her gentle voice was one of those which swell the time-honoured complaint, that in society you hear nothing but the same vapid small talk, the same trivial remarks over and over again. She was not neglected, but she awakened no interest. Her china blue eyes turned more and more frequently towards that tall figure with its lithe, panther-like grace sitting in the sun, regardless of the glare. Mary, whose care for her own soul came second only to her care for her complexion, wondered at her recklessness.

Mrs Lestrange introduced one or two men to Elsa, but they seemed to find but little to say to her. She was *distraite*, indifferent to

what was going on round her. After a time she was left alone, except when Mrs Lestrange came to sit by her for a few minutes. Yet she was a marked feature of the party. Wherever Elsa might be she could not be overlooked. Mysterious involuntary power which some women possess, not necessarily young and beautiful like Elsa, of becoming wherever they go a centre, a focus of attention whether they will or no.

Married men looked furtively at her, and whispered to their approving wives that Carstairs was a bold man, that nothing would have induced *them* to marry a woman of that stamp. The unmarried men looked at her too, but said nothing.

At seventeen Elsa's beauty was mature. It was not the thin wild-flower beauty of the young English girl who emerges but slowly from her chrysalis. It was the splendid pale perfection of the magnolia which opens in a night. The body had outstripped the embryo spirit. Out of the exquisite face, with its mysterious fore-

shadowing of latent emotion, looked the grave inscrutable eyes of a child.

Elsa appeared quite unconscious of the interest she excited. She looked fixedly at the gliding dwindling buildings, at the little alert brown-sailed eel-boats, and the solemn low-swimming hay barges, burning yellow in the afternoon sun, and dropping gold into the grey water as they went. Sometimes she looked up at the overhanging bridges, and past them to the sky. Presently, a white butterfly came twinkling on toddling, unsteady wings across the water, and settled on the awning. Elsa's eyes followed it. "It is coming with us," she said to Captain Lestrange, who was standing near her. The butterfly left the awning. It settled for a moment on the white rose on Elsa's breast. Now it was off again, a dancing baby fairy between the sunny sky and sunny river. Then all in a moment some gust of air caught its tiny spread sails, and flung it with wings outstretched upon the swift water.

Elsa gave a cry, and tearing the rose out

of her breast, leaned far over the railing and flung it towards the butterfly. It fell short. The current engulfed butterfly and rose together.

Captain Lestrange caught her by the arm as she leaned too far, and held her firmly till she recovered her balance.

"That was rather dangerous," he said, releasing her gently.

"I could not stand by and see it drown," said Elsa, shivering, and she turned her eyes back across the river, to where in the distance the white buildings of Greenwich stood almost in the water in the pearl haze.

Who shall say what Elsa's thoughts were as she leaned against the railing, white hand against white rose cheek, and watched the tide which was sweeping them towards the sea? Did she realise that another current was bearing her whither she knew not, was hurrying her little barque, afloat for the first time, towards a surging line of breakers where white sails of maiden innocence and faith and purity might perchance go under? Did she with those wonderful melancholy

eyes look across her youth and dimly foresee, what all those who have missed love learn in middle life, how chill is the deepening shadow in which a loveless life stands? Did she dimly see this, and shrink from the loveless marriage before her, which would close the door against love for ever? Did she in her great ignorance mistake the jewelled earthen cup of passion for the wine of love which should have brimmed it? Did she think to allay the thirst of the soul at the dazzling empty cup which was so urgently proffered to her? Who shall say what Elsa's thoughts were as the river widened to the sea.

. . . . .

They were coming back at last, beating up slowly, slowly against the tide towards London, lying low and dim against an agony of sunset. To Mary it had been an afternoon of slow torture. Ought she to speak to Elsa? "After the Speaker's Stairs" the telegram had said. Then Elsa meant to join Lord Francis on her return *this evening*. Ought not she, Mary, to go

to Elsa now, where she sat apart watching the sunset, and implore her to go home? Ought she not to tell her that Lord Francis was an evil man, who would bring great misery upon her? Ought she not to show her that she was steeping her young soul in sin, ruining herself upon the threshold of life? Something whispered urgently to Mary that she ought at least to try to hold Elsa back from the precipice, whispered urgently that perhaps Elsa, friendless as she was, might listen to her even at the eleventh hour. And Elsa knew she knew.

Was it Mary's soul—dwarfed and starved in the suffocating bandages of her straitened life and narrow religion—which was feebly stirring in its shroud, was striving to speak?

Mary clenched her little blue-veined hands.

No, no. Elsa would never listen to her. Elsa knew very well what she was doing. Any girl younger even than she knew that it was wicked to allow a married man to make love to her. Elsa was a bad woman by temperament and heredity, not fit to be

a good man's wife. Even if Mary could persuade her to give up her lover, still Elsa was guilty in thought, and that was as bad as the sin itself. Did not our Saviour say so? *Elsa was lost already.*

"No, no," whispered the inner voice. "She does not know what she is doing."

She did know very well what she was doing—Mary flushed with anger—she was always doing things for effect, in order to attract attention. Look how she had made eyes at Captain Lestrange about that butterfly. If there is one thing more than another which exasperates a conventional person it is an impulsive action. The episode of the butterfly rankled in Mary's mind. Several silly men had been taken in by it. No. She, Mary, would certainly speak to Elsa; she would be only too glad to save a fellow-creature from deadly sin if it was any *use* speaking—but it was not. And she did not care to mix herself up with odious, disgraceful subjects unless she could be of use. She had always had a high standard of refinement. She had always

kept herself apart from "that sort of thing." Perhaps, in her meagre life, she had also kept herself apart from all that makes our fellow-creatures turn to us.

Lord Francis' last threat, spoken low and distinct across the hansom doors, came back to her ears—"If you dare to interfere with me you will pay for it."

The river was narrowing. The buildings and wharves pushed up close and closer. The fretted outlines and towers of Westminster were detaching themselves in palest violet from the glow in the west.

A river steamer passed them with a band on board. A faint music, tender and gay, came to them across the water, bringing with it the promise of an abiding love, making all things possible, illuminating with sudden distinctness the vague meaning of this mysterious world of sunset sky and sunset water, and ethereal city of amethyst and pearl; and then—as suddenly as it came—passing away down stream, and taking all its promises with it, leaving the twilight empty and desolate.

The sunset burned dim like a spent furnace. The day lost heart and waned all at once. It seemed as if everything had come to an end.

And as, when evening falls, jasmine grows white and whiter in the falling light, so Elsa's face grew pale and paler yet in the dusk.

Once she looked across at Mary, and a faint smile, tremulous, wistful, stole across her lips. Tears shone in her eyes. "Is there any help anywhere?" the sweet troubled eyes seemed to say. But apparently they found none, for they wandered away again to the great buildings of Westminster rising up within a stone's throw over the black arch of Westminster Bridge.

The steamer slowed and stopped once more against the Speaker's Stairs.

The Lestranges put Elsa into a hansom before they hurried away in another themselves. All the guests were in a fever to depart, for there was barely time to dress for dinner—and they disappeared as if by magic. Mary, whose victoria was a moment

late, followed hard on the rest. As she was delayed in the traffic she saw the hansom in front of her turn slowly round. She saw Elsa's face inside as it turned. Then the hansom went gaily jingling its bell over Westminster Bridge, and was lost in the crowd.

PART III

"Thou wilt not with Predestination round
Enmesh me, and impute my Fall to Sin?"
—Omar Khayyám.

The scandal smouldered for a day or two, and then raged across London like a fire. Mary stayed at home. She could not face the glare of it. She said she was ill. Her hand shook. She started at the slightest sound. She felt shattered in mind and body.

"I could not have stopped her," she said stubbornly to herself a hundred times, lying wide-eyed through the long, terrify-

ing nights. She besieged Heaven with prayers for Elsa.

On the fourth day Jos came to her.

She went down to her little sitting-room, and found him standing at the open window with his back to her. She came in softly, trembling a little. She would be very gentle and sympathetic with him. She would imply no reproach. As she entered he turned slowly and faced her. The first moment she did not recognise him. Then she saw it was he.

Jos' face was sunk and pinched, and the grey eyes were red with tears fiercely suppressed by day, red with hard crying by night. Now as they met hers they were fixed, unflinching in their tearless, enduring agony, like those of a man under the surgeon's knife.

"Oh! Jos, don't take it so hard," said Mary, laying her hand on his arm.

She had never dreamed he would feel it like this. She had thought that he would see at once he had had a great escape.

He did not appear to hear her. He

looked vacantly at her, and then recollected himself, and sat down by her.

"You saw her last," he said, biting his lips.

Mary's heart turned sick within her.

"The Lestranges saw her last," she said hastily. He made an impatient movement. He knew all that.

"You were with her all the afternoon on the boat?"

"Yes. But, of course, there were numbers of others. I had many friends whom I had to——"

"Did you notice anything? Did you have any talk with her? Was she different to usual?"

"She does not generally talk much. She was rather silent."

"You did not think she looked as if she had anything on her mind."

"I couldn't say. I know her so very slightly." Mary's voice was cold.

"She did not care for me," said Jos. "I knew that all along," and he put his scarred hand over his mouth.

"She was not worthy of you."

He did not hear her. He took away his hand and clenched it heavily on the other.

"I knew she didn't care," he said in a level, passionless voice. "But I loved her. From the first go-off I saw she was different to other women. And I thought—I know I'm only a rough fellow—but I thought perhaps in time . . . I'm not up to much, but I would have made her a good husband —and at any rate, I would have taken her away from—her father. He said she was willing. I—I tried to believe him. He wanted to get rid of her—and—I wanted to have her. That was the long and the short of it. We settled it between us. . . . She hadn't a chance in that house. I thought I'd give her another—a home—where she was safe. She had never had a mother to tell her things. She had never had any upbringing at that French school. She had no women friends. She had never known a good woman, except her old nurse, till I brought her to you, Mary. I told her you were good and gentle and loving, and

would be a friend to her; and that I had known you all my life, and she might trust you."

"She never liked me," said Mary. It seemed to her that she must defend herself. Against what? Against whom?

"If she had only confided in you," he said. "I knew she was in trouble, but I could not make out what it was. She was such a child, and I seemed a long way off her. I took her to plays and things after I had seen them first, to be sure they were all right; and she would cheer up for a little bit—she liked the performing dogs. I had thought of taking her there again; but she always sank back into low spirits. And I knew that sometimes young girls do feel shy about being married—it's a great step—a lottery—that is what it is, a lottery—so I thought it would all come right in time. I never thought. I never guessed." Jos' voice broke. "I see now I helped to push her into it—but—I didn't know. . . . If only you had known that last afternoon, and could have pleaded with her . . . if

only you had known, and could have held her back—my white lamb, my little Elsa."

He ground his heel against the polished floor. There was a long silence.

Then he got up and went away.

. . . . . .

It was not until the end of July that Mary saw him again. She heard nothing of him. She only knew that he had left London. He came in one evening late, and Mary's aunt discreetly disappeared after a few minutes' desultory conversation.

He looked worn and aged, but he spoke calmly, and this time he noticed Mary's existence. "You look pulled down," he said kindly. "Has the season been too much for you?"

"It is not that," she said. "I have been distressed because an old friend of mine is in trouble."

He looked at her and saw that she had suffered. A great compunction seized him. He took her hand and kissed it.

"You are the best woman in the world," he said. "Don't worry your kind heart

about me. I'm not worth it." Then he moved restlessly away from her, and began turning over the knick-knacks on the silver table.

"Bethune has been tackled," he said suddenly. "The Duke of —— did it, and he has promised to marry her—if—if——"

"If what?"

"If his wife will divorce him. The Duke has got his promise in black and white."

"I don't think Lady Francis will divorce him."

"N-no. I've been with her to-day for an hour, but I couldn't move her. She doesn't seem to see that it's—life or death—for Elsa."

"You would not expect her under the circumstances to consider Elsa."

"Yes, I should," said the simpleton. "Why should not she help her? There are no children, and she does not care for Bethune. She never did. She ought to release him for the sake of—others."

"I don't think she will."

"I want you to persuade her, Mary."

Mary's heart swelled. This then was what he had come about.

"Aren't you her greatest friend? Do put it before her plainly. I'm a blundering idiot, and she seemed to think I had no right to speak to her on the subject. Perhaps I had not. I never thought of that. I only thought of——. But do you go to her, and bring her to a better mind."

"I will try," said Mary.

"I wish there were more women like you, Maimie," he said, using for the first time for years the pet name which he had called her by when they were boy and girl together.

Mary went to Lady Francis next day, but she did not make a superhuman effort to persuade her friend. She considered that it was not desirable that Elsa should be reinstated. If there were no punishment for such misdemeanours, what would society come to? For the sake of others, as a warning, it was necessary that Elsa should suffer.

All she said to Lady Francis was: "Are you going to divorce Lord Francis?"

"No, my dear," said that lady with a harsh little laugh. "I am not. Not that I could not get a divorce. He has been quite brute enough, but if I did it would be forgotten in about a quarter of an hour, whether I had divorced him or he had divorced me. I have a right to his name, and I mean to stick to it. It's about all I've got out of my marriage. I don't intend to go about as a divorced woman under my maiden name of Huggins. The idea does not smile on me. Besides, I know Francis. He will come back to me. He did—before. He has not a shilling, and he is in debt. He can't get on without me. I was a goose to marry him; but still I am the goose that lays the golden eggs."

Jos' parents sent Mary a pressing invitation to stay with them after the season. Mary went, and perhaps she tasted something more like happiness in that quiet old country house than she had known for many years. Jos' father and

mother were devoted to her, with that devotion, artificial in its origin, but genuine in its later stages, of parents who have made up their minds that she was "the one woman" for their son. Mary played old Irish melodies in the evenings by the hour, and sang sweetly at prayers. She was always ready to listen to General Carstairs' history of the *fauna* of Dampshire, and to take an interest in Mrs Carstairs' Sunday School. She had a succession of the simplest white muslin gowns (she could still wear white) and wide-brimmed garden hats. Mary in the country was more rural than those who abide in it all the year round.

Jos was often there. There was no doubt about it. Jos was coming back to his early allegiance. Perhaps his parents, horrified by his single unaided attempt at matrimony, were tenderly pushing him back. Perhaps, in the entire exhaustion and numbness that had succeeded the shock of Elsa's defection, he hardly realised what others were planning round him.

Perhaps when a man has been heartlessly slighted he turns unconsciously to the woman of whose undoubted love he is vaguely aware.

Jos sat at Mary's feet, not metaphorically but literally, for hours together by the sun-dial in the rose-garden; hardly speaking, like a man stunned. Still he sat there, and she did her embroidery, and looked softly down at him now and then. The doors of the narrow, airless prison of her love were open to receive him. They would be married presently, and she should make him give up the Army, and become a magistrate instead. She would never let him out of her sight. A wife's place is beside her husband. She knew, for how many wives compact of experience had assured her during the evening hour of feminine confidence when the back hair is let down, that the perpetual presence of the wife was the only safeguard for the well-being of that mysterious creature of low instincts, that half-tamed wild animal, always liable to break away unless

held in by feminine bit and bridle, that irresponsible babe, that slave of impulse—*man*. She would give him perfect freedom of course. She should encourage him to go into the Yeomanry, and she should certainly allow him to go out without her for the annual training. He would be quite safe in a tent, surrounded by his own tenantry; but, on other occasions, she, his wife, would be ever by his side. That was the only way to keep a man good and happy.

. . . . .

Early in September Jos went away for a few days' shooting. Mary, who generally paid rounds of visits after the season at dull country houses (she was not greatly in request at the amusing ones), still remained with the Carstairs, who implored her to stay on whenever she suggested that she was paying them "a visitation."

Jos was to return that afternoon, for General Carstairs was depending on him to help to shoot his own partridges on the morrow. But the afternoon passed, and

Jos did not come. The next day passed, and still no Jos. And no letter or telegram. His father and mother were silently uneasy. They said, no doubt he had been persuaded to stay on where he was, and had forgotten the shoot at home. Mary said, "No doubt," but a reasonless fear gathered like thin mist across her heart. Where was he? The letters that had been forwarded to his last address all came back. A week passed, and still no Jos, and no answers to autocratic telegrams.

Then suddenly Jos telegraphed from London saying he should return early that afternoon, and asking to be met at the station.

When the time drew near, Mary established herself with a book in the rose-garden. He would come to her there, as he had so often done before. The roses were well-nigh over, but in their place the sweet white faces of the Japanese anemones were crowding up round the old grey sundial. The sunny windless air was

full of the cawing of rooks. It was the time and the place where a desultory love might come by chance, and linger awhile, not where a desperate love, brought to bay, would wage one of his pitched battles. Peace and rest were close at hand. Why had she been fearful? Surely all was well, and he was coming back. He was coming back.

She waited as it seemed to her for hours before she heard the faint sound of his dog-cart. She should see him in a moment. He would speak to his parents, and then ask where she was, and come out to her. Oh! how she loved him; but she must appear calm, and not too glad to see him. She heard his step—strong, light, alert, as it used to be of old, not the slow, dragging, aimless step of the last two months.

He came quickly round the yew hedge and stood before her. She raised her eyes slowly from her book to meet his, a smile parting her lips.

He was looking hard at her with burn-

ing scorn and contempt in his lightning grey eyes.

The smile froze on her lips.

"I have seen Elsa," he said. "I only came back here for half-an-hour to—speak to you."

A cold hand seemed to be pressed against Mary's heart.

"I found by chance, the merest chance, where she was," he continued. "I went at once. She was alone, for Bethune has gone back to his wife. I suppose you knew he had gone back. I did not. I found her——" He stopped as if the remembrance were too acute, and then went on firmly. "We had a long talk. She was in great trouble. She told me everything, and how he, that devil, had made love to her from the first day she came back from school, and how her father knew of it, and had obliged her to accept me. And she said she knew it was wrong to run away with him, but she thought it was more wrong to marry without love, and that the nearer the day came the more she felt she must escape,

and she seemed hemmed in on every side, and she did love Bethune, and he had sworn to her that he would marry her directly he got his divorce, and that his wife did not care for him, and would be glad to be free, and that all that was necessary was a little courage on her part. So she tried to be brave—and—she said she did not think at the time it could be so very wicked to marry the person she really loved, for *you* knew, and you never said a word to stop her. She said you had many opportunities of speaking to her on the boat, and she knew you were so good, you would certainly have told her if it was really so very wicked."

"I knew it was no use speaking," said Mary, hoarsely.

"You might have tried to save my wife for my sake," said Jos. "You might have tried to save her for her own. But you didn't. I don't care to know your reasons. I only know that—you did not do it. You deliberately—let—her—drown." His eyes flashed. The whole quiet, commonplace

man seemed transfigured by some over-mastering, ennobling emotion. "And I have come to tell you that I think the bad women are better than the good ones, and that I am going back to Elsa; to Elsa —betrayed, deserted, outcast, my Elsa, who, but for you, might still be like one of these." He touched one of the white anemones with his scarred hand. "I am going back to her —and if—in time she can forget the past and feel kindly towards me—I will marry her."

And he did.

THE END

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